

Dialogue Across Difference: Supporting Students in Civil Discourse



Written by Alan Gottlieb

This article was originally written in early March 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic taking hold around the world. We are releasing it now, just ahead of the 2020 U.S. election, because the current political, economic, and social climate is such that the need to listen respectfully has never been stronger or more critical to the future of our nation.

The 2016 presidential election was one of the most polarizing events in recent U.S. history. It became apparent in the election's wake that the much-discussed "red-blue divide" had, in fact, cleaved the country in two. Left unchecked, this growing divide could threaten the nation's stability.

As dire as that may sound, the event of Donald Trump's election also galvanized some people on both sides of the political/societal divide to address that divide directly. This has led to powerful and positive efforts aimed at promoting productive dialogue across differences. Though dwarfed in the public consciousness by highly publicized volumes of negative discourse, these efforts to bring people together are growing in breadth and depth.

The simple idea shared by these homegrown campaigns is that we need to learn how to listen to one another respectfully, and disagree without demonizing. Given that feelings run high on a whole host of issues that divide us, this can be more challenging than it initially sounds. Engaging in productive dialogue across differences requires careful thought and preparation, and well-established protocols that all participants agree upon in advance.

Dialogue across differences in middle and high schools offers opportunities for adolescents, still forming their identities, to consider on a deep level differing perspectives on issues. But it takes a delicate touch for educators to ensure that such conversations are productive, non-threatening, and non-judgmental.

In this paper, we will explain what we mean by dialogue across differences, and why it is especially important at this moment. We'll highlight some examples of individuals, organizations, and institutions doing it well, and offer some suggestions for educators who want to promote these kinds of deep discussions in their classrooms or larger school communities.

About the author:

Alan Gottlieb

Alan Gottlieb is a Colorado-based writer, editor, journalist, and nonprofit entrepreneur, with more than 20 years of experience in education policy and education journalism. Currently, Alan is owner of Write.Edit.Think., LLC, an independent communications consulting firm. Alan co-founded Chalkbeat, a growing and increasingly prominent national news nonprofit focused on PreK-12 education policy, policy implementation and practice. He won a 2015 Heartland Emmy award as a writer and producer of the Rocky Mountain PBS documentary series “Standing in the Gap,” which examined Denver Public Schools’ record on integration and closing the achievement gap since court-ordered busing ended 20 years ago. From 1988-97, Alan was a reporter and editor with The Denver Post. From 1997 until June 2007, he served as education program officer at The Piton Foundation in Denver. He is the author of two books, one fiction, one non-fiction.

Why is dialogue across differences so important now?

A survey conducted in January 2020 by the Pew Research Center showed that an overwhelming majority of Americans — 91 percent — perceive very strong or strong conflicts between self-identified Democrats and Republicans. That’s a 10 percentage point increase from 2012, during President Obama’s reelection campaign, when partisan feelings already were running high.

Since 2012, of course, social media has exploded, partisan television networks have become increasingly strident and extreme, and malign actors at home and from other countries have worked tirelessly to drive wedges between different segments of the population. People have demonstrated a tendency to retreat into opinion bubbles where they expose themselves only to people who think as they do, as well as articles, videos, and other forms of media that reinforce their beliefs.

There is a reason people tend to go tribal at such times: it’s hardwired into our brains.

“I have been reading how the brain reacts to disagreement, and it turns out we have evolved so little since living in caves and being chased by tigers compared to how we live now that we experience threats to our values and beliefs about the same as we experience physical threats,” said

Lara Schwartz, director of the Project on Civil Discourse at American University. A 2017 study conducted by researchers from the University of California addresses this issue in great detail.

Fomenting discord when feelings run at a fever pitch might benefit our adversaries and those who profit from disharmony. But people like Schwartz who work to build understanding among people with different belief systems also see this moment in time as ripe for breaking down barriers.

“The combination of the current media environment, the spread of misinformation, the much more rough and tumble nature of our political discourse, and the rise of extremism in this country all contribute to the need to create some way of talking about how we listen and speak and learn in communities,” Schwartz said.

The following examples of efforts to foster dialogue across differences and to spread the practice to more people and groups offer some common lessons that we will distill in the last section of this article.



Example

Waynflete School

Waynflete is an independent PreK-12 school in Portland Maine, where promoting dialogue across differences has been a core value for more than 20 years. In the early 2000s, as Portland became a hub of refugee resettlement, the 120-year-old school reached into those communities to diversify its student body.

"We were able to tap into a great richness when we had kids from all over the world coming here," said Lowell Libby, the head of Waynflete's upper school. "And it gave us a much richer racial and ethnic mix as well." It also caused Waynflete to reassess how to structure classroom discussions to include and respect all voices and divergent points of view.

Waynflete staff recognized... they needed to do more than provide the experience of having dialogue across differences. "We needed to explicitly teach them the skills."

"Between about 2005 and 2014, we developed various methods for internal dialogue, doing a good job of creating opportunities for discussion across differences," Libby said.

But then, beginning five or six years ago, Waynflete graduates started coming back for visits from college during breaks and complaining that they were having their heads taken off on campus for speaking their minds instead of "saying the expected thing."

Waynflete staff recognized that, if they were to prepare students for the post-Waynflete world, they needed to do more than provide the experience of having dialogue across differences. "We needed to explicitly teach them the skills."

From that realization, the Dialogue Project was born. The project, Libby said, aimed to "make dialogue a keystone habit in the upper school so that when encountering someone with a different viewpoint, instead of seeing that as a place to fight or flight, kids see it as an opportunity to learn."

More recently, Waynflete took dialogue across differences a step further, launching an initiative called *Can We*. "In partnership with the Maine Heritage Policy Center, the initial project brought together 29 youth from seven schools across Maine who represented a diverse range of backgrounds, political viewpoints, and life experiences," according to the Waynflete website. "Over five months, the students worked together with experienced facilitators to learn to talk across deep divides, develop a shared vision of a better Maine, and design an interactive forum with political leadership. Students were asked to question their own ideas, challenge each other, and collaborate. In the process they developed basic democratic skills seemingly lost in this divisive moment: valuing dialogue, mediating differences, holding elected officials accountable, and working collectively for a higher purpose."

Can We led to some transformative moments for kids from a variety of backgrounds. One example Libby cited was rural and urban students, with very different experiences with and feelings about guns and gun control, succeeded in coming together and thinking about "some very common sense approaches to guns," he said. "The kids who were 'no guns ever' understood why other people saw guns as a source of safety instead of a threat. They could really hear each other."



Example

StoryCorps: One Small Step

StoryCorps is a 15-year-old project that brings people who know and love each other together in a recording studio to tell their stories. Many of the recordings are archived at the Library of Congress.

In the wake of the 2016 election, StoryCorps founder Dave Isay “was inspired to see if we could use the StoryCorps model to get folks who don’t know each other, and who are seemingly opposed politically, to have a conversation

and get to know each other on a human level.” Stacey Todd, director of this new initiative, called One Small Step, said, “Dave often quotes Mother Teresa who said, ‘If we have no, peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.’ We’re working to remind everyone that we belong to each other.”

Echoing Waynflete, Todd said the goal of One Small Step isn’t persuasion, or changing anyone’s mind. Rather, it’s to demonstrate that two strangers with different views on contentious issues can have a civil conversation that helps them see the human being behind the opinion.

One Small Step matches strangers for recorded conversations by having interested people fill out three-question questionnaires in cities where the project is recording. Producers then match people who have starkly opposing views.

“We’ve found the conversations are most productive if the two people have a shared interest or passion of some kind — a bit of common ground from which to start.” Todd said.

The best-known One Small Step encounter matched Joseph Weidknecht, a Trump supporter in a Make America Great Again cap and Amina Amdeen, a Muslim woman in a hijab. They first met at an anti-Trump protest in Austin,

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Texas shortly after the 2016 election. Amdeen saw some protesters trying to light Weidknecht’s shirt on fire, and then snatching his MAGA hat off his head. That’s when she snapped and chased them down. Having had her hijab tugged off her head, seeing Weidknecht victimized was too much for her to bear.

The two have become friends, despite vast cultural and political differences. Amdeen is the first Muslim Weidknecht has ever met. But Weidknecht has developed empathy for Adeen because he feels socially isolated from former friends who stopped speaking to him when he supported Trump.

“I hope I can be the reason that someone decides to talk to someone instead of just cutting them out of their life or blocking them on Twitter,” Weidknecht tells Amdeen.

StoryCorps has long offered guides for teachers on how to encourage thoughtful dialogues between and among students. Those materials can be readily adapted to One Small Step in a school environment, Todd said.

Example

Kialo

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Errikos Pitsos grew up in Germany, the son of two philosophy PhDs. In his home, he was surrounded by erudite and impassioned debate on a wide variety of topics. It made him appreciate the value of reasoning, and the importance of separating debate and rational argument from emotion.

“It is an extremely important skill to be able, in a humane and calm fashion, to agree to disagree and to talk about each others’ differences and to argue for one side without becoming personal,” Pitsos said.

An early adopter of online discussions -- years before the World Wide Web was born -- Pitsos grew frustrated at the challenge of debating productively online. In the web’s early days, a rapidfire back-and-forth debate was technologically challenging. Later, the web’s obsession over clicks and audience engagement rewarded snarkiness over substance. Debates, especially political debates, became more about viral one-liners and personal attacks than substantive argument. Pitos was determined to change that.

From that determination, Kialo, (the Esperanto word for reason) a free online hub for civilized, rational debate, was born.

It’s an online platform unlike anything else. It requires participants to post an argument -- called a claim on the site -- in the most concise way possible. For example: “Wealthy countries should provide their citizens with a universal basic income (UBI).”

People then post one-sentence pro or con claims either bolstering or disputing the original point. An example of a ‘pro’ claim: “A UBI is an effective tool for societies to prepare for and embrace future developments and technological progress.” A ‘con’ claim counters: “A UBI erodes the personal and societal incentives for financial responsibility, self-improvement, and hard work.”

are arguments based on emotion of course. But the presentation and the way you argue and frame issues should not be emotionally evocative.”

Last fall, Pitsos decided to create a Kialo platform tailored for use in schools. He found that educators across the globe were already using Kialo.com in significant numbers, but it wasn’t an ideal situation, especially for younger students.

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Any pro or con claim can evolve into a deep debate of its own, with people diving deeper and providing equally pithy pros and cons. The only comments allowed to claims are asking for clarification or a citation.

“Most online tools are built for engagement in the sense of comments or likes or what have you,” Pitsos said. “We are not built for engagement. We do not want to additionally stir engagement in the sense we usually think of it.”

Instead, Kialo aims to “deploy the most controversial topics into the most antagonistic settings and get people to argue those topics the right way.”

To Pitsos’ way of thinking, the right way is purely rational, devoid of heat and fire. “Emotion in debate doesn’t really have a place. There

“As a teacher, you want to control what kids are exposed to and on the .com site they are going to come across debates about abortion, and guns, and other topics that might not be ideal,” Pitsos said.

Kialo-edu allows teachers to control debate topics, to see which students are posting claims and how often, and for teachers to interject on the platform and provide feedback and guidance. It, too, is free to use.

Kialo-edu is a good tool for schools, because it allows students to dive deep into topics without reading “10-page articles on either side of an issue,” Pitsos said. Further, it allows introverted students, dyslexic students, and students who aren’t fluid writers to participate in debates on an equal footing with their peers.

Example

Make Shift Coffee House

Craig Freshley is a professional facilitator based in Brunswick, Maine. Like many others, he was disturbed by the ugly undertones of the 2016 presidential election, and how, in its aftermath, the level of public and private discourse seemed to deteriorate. So he decided to do something about it in his corner of the world.

In the wake of the election, “it hit me like a ton of bricks how we really do have a serious political divide and we are failing to understand the other side,” Freshley said. “So I had this idea: Let’s bring two sides together; not to find common ground, not to agree, not to persuade each other about who’s right, but simply to understand each other.”



“I want to hear your story. I don’t want to hear theories, morality, science. We can argue those things. We can’t argue your experience.”

That, Freshley said, has been the “singular purpose” of the Make Shift Coffee House since early 2017. As its name suggests, Make Shift Coffee House isn’t a place. It’s an idea, and it takes place in a variety of locations. The two constants are productive conversation and live music.

Freshley sees particular utility in bringing disparate groups together. Recently, for example, he has held Make Shift Coffee House sessions that include students from Bowdoin College in Brunswick -- most of them on the left side of the

political spectrum -- and residents of Richmond, Maine, a rural town just 20 minutes away that voted overwhelmingly for Trump in 2016. Sessions have taken place both on the Bowdoin Campus and in a Grange Hall in Richmond.

Bowdoin paid for the entire undertaking, and provided bus transportation for students and Richmond residents alike. Students had to commit to five consecutive evenings of preparation, context-setting, dialogue, and debriefing. More than 20 took the opportunity.

“It was pretty powerful. Maybe even life-changing for at least a couple of the students,” Freshley said.

One example he cited was a conversation about the American flag. Bowdoin students sided with former pro-football player Colin Kaepernick’s protest, in which he knelt during the national anthem. But at one of the sessions, a Richmond resident who was a veteran of three tours in Afghanistan stood up and, fighting back tears, told of how he had delivered folded flags to the widows of six of his friends who had died in the line of duty.

“He said, basically, ‘if you can’t respect this flag, I’ve got nothing to say to you. You’re dead to me. My buddies died for this flag.’ And that was pretty touching.”

Two things set Make Shift Coffee Houses apart and are the secrets of their success, Freshley said. The first is that “we only want to understand each other.” No one is out to change anyone’s mind. Participants can feel safe, knowing they are likely to walk out of the room holding the same beliefs as when they walked in. It opens people up and provides “a precious opportunity to hear why your adversaries believe what they believe. That is very powerful.”

The second key is that everyone is expected to speak from their own personal experience. Unlike listening to a panel of experts debate a contentious topic like gun control, people’s personal experiences with, say, guns levels the playing field. “Each one of us is an expert on our own experience,” Freshley said. “I want to hear your story. I don’t want to hear theories, morality, science. We can argue those things. We can’t argue about your experience.”

Freshley has worked with high school groups on coffee house-like events. He said that when conversation gets heated, he always draws the students back to their own experiences, rather than opinions or even deeply held beliefs. He said retreating to that “ready-made place” tamps down aggression and anger.

Dialogue across differences in middle and high school

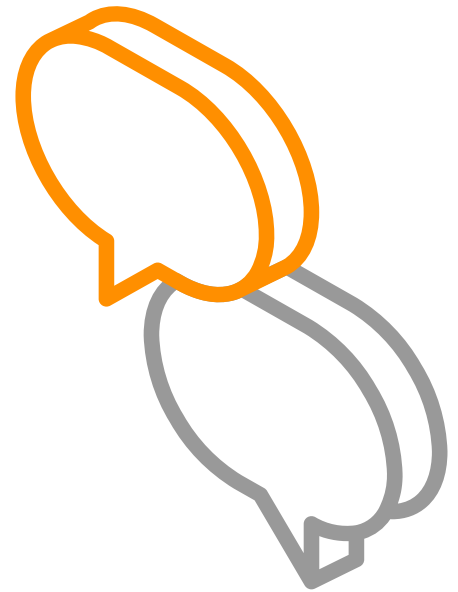
Students in middle and high school are at an ideal age to learn the value of dialogue across differences, and to begin forming the habits of listening empathetically that will benefit them — and those with whom they interact — throughout their lives.

But because feelings can run extremely high among adolescents, conversations across differences have to include ground rules and guardrails, so that the conversations don't descend into personal invective, ad hominem attacks, and emotional outbursts.

Here are a few pointers on fostering productive dialogue across differences with middle and high school students. Some of these ideas come from interviews, others from an excellent report from The Aspen Institute's Better Arguments Project, "Better Arguments in Middle School."

- Make clear upfront that all points of view will be acknowledged, and that students with different opinions will be given equal "airtime." In other words, develop a 'social contract' before anything else. Pushback on ideas is fine, as long as it's respectfully delivered.
- In class, after hearing an opinion, claim, or assertion, "move from civil debate to rigorous inquiry," said Lara Schwartz of the Project on Civil Discourse at American University. This means asking a class, "What more do we need to learn to know if that is true? How can we become more expert in this area?"
- Always turn dialogues back to people's personal experiences and away from sweeping statements or generalizations. "When someone makes an accustory or insulting statement, I ask them, 'what in your experience has led you to that belief?'" said Craig Freshley of Make Shift Coffee House.
- Take winning off the table. Dialogue across differences is not debate, where scoring points and coming out on top is the goal. Instead, it's about developing knowledge and social-emotional skills.
- Relationship-building comes first. Before launching into a dialogue, students must feel safe and comfortable. One way to build relationships is to have students develop dialogue topics themselves, rather than having topics chosen by teachers.

As we said early in this article, it is heartening that colleges, universities, K-12 schools and for- and non-profit organizations see the value of promoting dialogue across differences in these contentious times. Abundant online resources exist that can help educators get started on what might seem a daunting endeavor. We'll list below the resources referenced throughout this piece, as well as some additional resources that should be helpful.



RESOURCE LINKS:

[Project on Civil Discourse at American University](#)
[Dialogue Project \(Waynflete School\)](#)
[Can We \(Waynflete School\)](#)
[StoryCorps One Small Step](#)
[StoryCorps guides for teachers](#)
[Kialo](#)
[Kialo-edu](#)
[Make Shift Coffee House](#)
[Better Arguments in Middle School](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE LINKS:

[Riverdale School Campus Discourse](#)
[WeListen, University of Michigan](#)