

Humanizing Campus Discourse: Teaching Humanization to Facilitate Student Development in a Polarized World

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Introduction

Freedom of speech and civil discourse in higher education are crucial to the personal and academic development of students. This development occurs via official and unofficial opportunities to engage inside the classroom and throughout campus. Students are in school to learn and evolve. Is the campus a safe space to bring up their own underdeveloped worldviews? If students cannot, or will not, share their viewpoints, then maybe they will miss the chance for their personal worldviews to be addressed and refined by the perspectives of others who come from completely different backgrounds and experiences. Mature civil discourse is healthy for an appropriate exchange of ideas, but what happens when students feel a tension on their freedom of speech, and are unsure where the lines are drawn as to what should be said and what should not? Beyond that, how do we ensure that students have a framework to communicate and connect with one another, regardless of the divisiveness or uncertainties of the topic or climate, in order to allow, respect, welcome and learn from different perspectives and backgrounds?

This essay attempts to address these questions, beginning with a brief overview of the protected status of freedom of speech, and the connection to civil discourse in higher education. Then, the issue of growing divisiveness in American society is examined, and how this 1) spills into college campuses and poisons the usage of free speech, 2) adversely affects the marginalization of students, and 3) leads to a “chilling effect” (students inhibiting their own self-expression) and other types of censorship on college campuses – all of which negatively impact the capability to have a culture of robust and healthy student civil discourse. The essay then briefly introduces the practice of intergroup dialogue (guided conversations to increase mutual understanding between social groups) and touches on its use as an aid for students to come together over divides. Finally, questions are posed regarding possibilities for using humanization (an organic product of intergroup dialogue) as a separate, more refined process and skill that can serve as an overarching worldview and framework. There is little to no literature found regarding humanization as a teachable subject in higher education, where student identity development intersects with powerful campus ideological influences. Incorporating the teaching of humanization through mandatory classes or specialized instructors will lead college students to instinctively employ empathy and human connection to naturally navigate intercultural challenges and divisiveness more broadly, effectively, and consistently. This will help students engage in healthy, productive interactions that enable greater personal and ideological development despite our polarized society.

The Value of Free Speech and Civil Discourse on College Campuses

Free speech has been challenged many times but has a firm history of being upheld by the American court system. In these judicial decisions that have maintained the protection of free speech, we are often reminded of the value that it holds not only for the general American public, but especially for our university campuses:

The vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools. The classroom is peculiarly the “marketplace of ideas.” The Nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth “out of a multitude of tongues, rather than through any kind of authoritative selection.” (U.S. Supreme Court, 1967, as cited in Combs, 2018, p. 175).

Here the U.S. Supreme Court has acknowledged that higher education is where ideas, perspectives, backgrounds, and ideologies are expected to collide, not only for the good of the individuals involved, but for the collective good of this nation by virtue of the development of these college students meeting in self-discovery and self-expression. Our nation knows that our university system is ground zero for healthy, civil, ideological combat, and through these opportunities for students to bring together varying perspectives and backgrounds, a healthy and productive civil discourse is meant to be born. Civil discourse increases “cultural knowledge, respect for people and places, skills of reflection and communication, critical thinking abilities, creativity, and a sense of empathy to make their workplace, the world they will inherit, safe, equitable, and productive” (Morris, 2016, p. 361). U.S. society depends on the “role that post-secondary education plays in improving civil discourse nationally and creating safe spaces for dialogue and personal growth on campuses” (Morris, 2016, p. 361). Without the kind of environment that fosters the exchange of ideas, campuses suffer a decrease in opportunities for learning and development.

Harmful Free Speech

Civil discourse in higher education today faces grave challenges. There are many examples on college campuses showing that unfettered free speech does not necessarily equate to healthy, developmental civil discourse:

There were people making comments about BLM, All Lives Matter, the Klu Klux Klan, and the Back to Africa Movement, and how these discussions created “civil discourse” among our campus community. However, given that civil discourse is understood to be an engagement in conversation/discourse to better understanding, there was no true civil discourse on campus. Instead, campus was divided, and it created conflict. (Kirby, 2018, p. 54).

This highlights a problematic aspect of freedom of speech in higher education today, which is that it exists in a highly toxic environment that is reflective of the divisiveness pervading

all layers of this country. From violent common street demonstrations and counter-protests, to the stubborn, partisan ineptitude that seems to get worse every election cycle in the United States, people of conflicting points of view are not putting in the work needed to communicate, let alone come to successful understanding and compromise. Americans on all strata of society are increasingly unwilling to come together, listen to, and connect with each other over differing opinions to solve problems. Linvill & Pyle (2017), through a 2014 study by the Pew Research Center, found that “Americans are more politically polarized now than they have been for the past 20 years, and political animosity has increased throughout this same period” (p. 214). Unfortunately, the negative influences of this divisive toxicity have a huge impact on higher education. Morris (2016) writes that “colleges and universities cannot exist, untainted, in a context of incivility, violence, and bigotry” (p. 361). Combs (2018) tells us that “with the growing hostile political climate, there is an increased need for tolerance of varying viewpoints, especially in the educational setting” (p. 170).

This divisiveness can be especially painful for marginalized students and groups whenever free speech is wielded bluntly or sharply, knowingly or unknowingly, as a weapon of ignorant, irresponsible, and uncompassionate rhetoric. With the growing divisiveness on college campuses today, there are many examples all across the country where students are using free speech in ways that are truly alarming, harmful, and extremely painful to their fellow students of marginalized identities:

One of the hardest things that I had to do at that time was listen to my residents as they voiced their concerns and frustrations because they did not see how the rhetoric that was being used was harmful to those of marginalized identities. (Kirby, 2018, p. 54).

This has led to calls from social justice movements and many others for the need to protect students of marginalized identities from growing instances of painful, harmful vitriol on college campuses – vitriol that has been increasingly open and flaunted, flying under the banner of freedom of speech as a justification for its existence and expression. Even though certain advocates for free speech would not recognize any limitations on their rights, there is indeed a set of parameters guiding the right to free speech specifically in the higher education setting:

The First Amendment does not guarantee the right to communicate one’s view at all times and places or in any manner that may be desired. Accordingly, universities may place restrictions on the time, place and manner of protected speech, as long as it is not based on the content of the speech. Moreover, the restriction must be narrowly tailored to serve a compelling interest, which in this case would be student safety. (Combs, 2018, p. 172).

This fault line in higher education between the sanctity of American free speech, and the safety of students’ mental, emotional, and physical well-being, is a place of much tension, ambiguity, disagreement, and confusion on college campuses. In fact, even college students of marginalized identities may experience an inner conflict between the right to free speech and the need to protect themselves from it:

It was difficult for me (as one of their peers and, on top of that, someone who was supposed to provide them guidance) to separate myself from how I felt personally and what I could do and say professionally. For me, this was the first time that I truly felt that I had to separate myself as a student, a peer, and as a student worker on my campus because I did not want to violate my peers' or my residents' right to freedom of speech. However, I also wanted to be able to voice my concern that what was being said could possibly be considered hate speech. (Kirby, 2018, p. 55).

Censorship as a Reaction

The tension between freedom of speech and student mental and physical safety has led to different forms of censorship on campus. One explicit form of widespread censorship is the overall absence of official campus conversations and debates regarding sociopolitical hot topics such as immigration, gun control, and abortion policies (La Noue, 2019). Ironically, this means that the sociopolitical divisiveness on campus itself is leading to a reduction in the very kind of civil discourse that could serve to remedy much of that same harmful and ignorant divisiveness; this includes higher education professionals who also feel pressure to steer clear from sensitive topics and particular stances (La Noue, 2019). The divisiveness in this way is acting as an autoimmune disease, attacking the very system that would serve as a defense and healing mechanism against it.

In addition to the lack of official student debates or conversations on critical sociopolitical topics, self-censorship in higher education can take other forms, such as when students do not believe there is a safe space (or a "brave space") to express themselves:

However, I did notice a significant change in how I operated within the classroom for my social work course. When we addressed topics related to race, I found it difficult to articulate my beliefs or opinions because I did not want to be known as the "angry black guy." (Kirby, 2018, p. 55).

Another kind of self-censorship that may be occurring on college campuses is when students of privilege are well-intentioned but unable to exercise their desire to engage in certain conversations because they do not sense that there is the space to speak from privileged ignorance without being shamed for that ignorance. This would-be expression may have taken the form of raising genuine, logical questions to resolve their cognitive dissonance and inexperience. The self-censorship of a student with privilege will likely not be nearly as painful or engrossing as the self-censorship of the marginalized student; however, both cases create a silencing fear that serves to further obfuscate these delicate subject matters:

[The] restriction on speech that is deemed controversial or offensive may deter students of varying viewpoints from speaking altogether. Such a restriction creates a lack of diverse viewpoints and is so overbroad that it leaves students unsure of what sort of speech is permitted and what is prohibited. Consequently,

students refrain from speaking altogether because they fear that they will be punished for their expression. Thus, this sort of restriction has a chilling effect, which not only is prohibited by law but also prevents discussion and the exchange of ideas that are particularly critical in the educational environment. (Combs, 2018, p. 173).

This chilling effect goes against the natural student instinct to seek clarity. On the losing end of the lack of challenging, authentic, nuanced, and impactful conversations are other students within the vicinity, whether in the same classroom, dorm room, locker room, Zoom room, etc., that would have been privy to these real conversations. These are powerfully formative conversations where, for example, a student with a marginalized identity might speak personally and directly, but non-judgmentally, to a student who holds privilege. Another example of these powerfully formative conversations is when students who hold opposing values speak openly and humanely with one another to describe exactly what is and is not offensive, and what is and is not true regarding their own identities and beliefs. In this way students discover each other more genuinely and make progress in understanding real reasons for differences between them. These difficult, authentic conversations, whether students are directly involved or are experiencing them as first-hand witnesses, also have the capacity to break students through to higher levels of moral cognitive development (Hurtado et al., 2012). Instead, not only does the chilling effect impact student and campus development, it can also lead to an array of destructive pathological effects for those who are silencing themselves. These pathologies include increased stress, depression, a perception that one's perspective does not matter, limiting of creativity, declining interest in one's work, and declining efficacy of decision making (Perlow & Repenning, 2009). It is clear that higher education needs a way to resolve this tension so that students can speak and express themselves openly while embracing the humanity in themselves and one another.

Midpoint Summary

Thus far, we have recognition that a) freedom of speech is important for healthy civil discourse in higher education; b) colleges and universities must provide the environment and opportunities for civil discourse for students to develop into leaders, professionals, and the kinds of individuals this world needs to make a better present and future; c) for these reasons, free speech has a historic judicial precedence of being legally protected on college campuses; d) universities must balance free speech with the need to protect students physically, mentally, and emotionally; e) striking this balance today is a formidable challenge that is further exacerbated by a tumultuous, dangerous American sociopolitical climate; f) bowing to the fear and destruction that this climate generates, and the avoidance of addressing this issue head on, causes unquantifiable negative damage to student development, human connections, and campus environments. Now let us approach concepts of how these challenges can be addressed to improve higher education.

Teaching Humanization

One reason given for the extreme polarization in the United States today is that people who disagree with each other do not put effort into seeing the good that exists in one another (Noddings, 2018). The solution to this may include “the idea that we can abandon the goal of defeating our opponents, and instead embrace the goal of accommodating one another” (Muldoon, 2017, p. 331). Intergroup dialogue incorporates these notions of seeing the good in one another and striving to accommodate and work together for mutual benefit. This practice is considered useful for resolving sociopolitical tensions, misunderstandings, and divisions:

At its most fundamental, dialogue refers to a process where parties come together with the goal of increased mutual understanding. It is distinct from other forms of group interactions in its intention, goals, structure, and process, which are designed to elicit safety, understanding, learning, and often healing and transformational shifts in conflicted contexts. Dialogue has often been used as a peacebuilding tool in conflicted societies and recent decades have shown an increase in the use of structured dialogue as a means of addressing intergroup conflict and long-standing communal issues. (Tint, 2011, p. 332).

Wholehearted intergroup dialogue is seen as an environment conducive to healthy civil discourse. “Ultimately, the free speech argument may melt away when people sit down in dialogue one-on-one or in small groups, and speak from their heart about what they feel, believe, assume, and have experienced” (Zúñiga et al., 2007, as cited in Dessei et al., 2012). One pivotal aspect of intergroup dialogue that is often not mentioned is the humanization that occurs as an underlying process:

The hope is that, through these contact experiences, parties will engage in ways that shift the relationship of enmity, reduce the power of competing social identities, increase the potential for humanization of the “other,” and forge new relational and situational possibilities in the future. (Tint, 2011, p. 333).

The technical definition of humanization includes: “to attribute human qualities to” and “to make humane” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). To understand the natural humanization that occurs when individuals or groups openly and vulnerably engage in dialogue, it can be helpful to look at its exact opposite: dehumanization.

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who survived years of dehumanization and torture in the Nazi concentration camps. The following is a personal recount, first published in the German language in 1946, where he illustrates what it is to experience the feeling of dehumanization as a prisoner in these concentration camps, and how that feeling of dehumanization was more painful than any physical or verbal injury:

Strangely enough, a blow which does not even find its mark can, under certain circumstances, hurt more than one that finds its mark. Once I was standing on a railway track in a snowstorm. In spite of the weather our party had to keep on working. I worked quite hard at mending the track with gravel, since that was the

only way to keep warm. For only one moment I paused to get my breath and to lean on my shovel. Unfortunately the guard turned around just then and thought I was loafing. The pain he caused me was not from any insults or any blows. That guard did not think it worth his while to say anything, not even a swearword, to the ragged, emaciated figure standing before him, which probably reminded him only vaguely of a human form. Instead, he playfully picked up a stone and threw it at me. That, to me, seemed the way to attract the attention of a beast, to call a domestic animal back to its job, a creature with which you have so little in common that you do not even punish it. (Frankl, 1992, p. 36).

Frankl vividly illustrates how humans need to feel “seen” by one another; we need to know in our souls that the other person or group is engaging with us with the respect and honor that is due to a living, feeling, imperfect human being who is also vulnerable to pain and suffering, and who also longs for the same kind of undefinable human connection. These needs in us may require more study, but they are there, and they are wrapped up in the word and practice of “humanization.”

What if humanization is the real “meat” of the intergroup dialogue process? “Within dialogue, it is the humanization of the other that allows the fractured past to emerge into a different vision of the future” (Tint, 2011, p. 333). Could humanization be the most impactful aspect of intergroup dialogue that improves the capability to engage in healthy civil discourse?

There is a lack of research regarding the practice and development of humanization between students on college campuses. What if it is possible to isolate the key components that build humanization, and teach these components to students outside of intergroup dialogue? Could college students learn humanization in a more generalized sense towards all humanity instead of having it develop only towards the specific social identities in an intergroup dialogue session? If college students were taught to apply humanization to humanity as a whole, would these students more ably navigate unpredictable and novel social situations, disagreements, moral dilemmas, and times of cognitive dissonance?

This is not to say that the use of intergroup dialogue on campuses should be reduced at all. Rather, these questions point to the possibility of expanding a crucially effective part of intergroup dialogue by focusing on and honing the essentials of what causes one person to humanize another, and then instilling that skillset and instinct into the student's psyche to create a more generalized humanizing habit. This would serve as a more encompassing, natural, and effective way to help solve these current issues of marginalization, hate speech, campus censorship, and the national inability to engage in constructive civil discourse. Students would use a humanized worldview to perceive cultures, sociopolitical divides, personal backgrounds, and the ignorance of others who have a lack of experience; students would have greater tolerance because they would see in others the same humanistic qualities they see in themselves. This would not be known solely cognitively, but would be “felt” through empathy and greater aptitude for developing human connections.

Opportunities for Research and Action

There is a need for additional research on how to effectively teach humanization in

higher education, including the need for insight into appropriate course content, pedagogical methods and practical learning outcomes. A course on humanization may deserve the designation as a requirement among all first-year college students. This is not a far stretch considering that this country has been unable to unify to combat existential threats like global warming, the COVID-19 pandemic, and systemic oppression, which cost thousands upon thousands of lives and much undue suffering. Grand solutions to these threats require the ability for us to understand each other and compromise towards mutual benefits.

Once proper pedagogy is established for teaching humanization on campus, one possible way to assess for effectiveness is to utilize the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). The IDI is a survey instrument with proven validity and reliability used to gauge intercultural competence and responsiveness. As humanization is taught to students, the humanizing worldviews and skills acquired could be reflected in an improved IDI score. The IDI could be administered to students before they begin their humanization training, and again after they finish the course to see if scores improve. Another way to assess for results would be to implement a yearly survey on the feeling of belonging on campus. As more first-year students take the humanization course, a yearly campus-wide assessment should reflect an increase in greater belonging that students feel as they are able to make more genuine, deeper connections with one another. An additional way to gauge success of humanization training is to observe whether there is an increase in substantive conversations or debates on divisive topics occurring on campus; in other words, censorship would be decreased because the increase in humanization would allow productive civil discourse to prevail. The increase in these conversations can be tracked through any campus office which registers and promotes student events. Increased student interest in service-learning opportunities, which could be measured by the number of inquiries made by the students, would also be an indicator of successful humanization training, because as students learn to humanize they will be more apt to recognize and empathize with the critical needs of other populations and communities.

Conclusion

Intergroup dialogue incorporates the participants developing the ability to humanize one another. However, whereas intergroup dialogue requires time with people of different social or group identities, the underlying process of humanization can be taught outside of intergroup dialogue. It is possible to deliberately focus on this foundational aspect of intergroup dialogue to help students create a general mental muscle of humanization so that it becomes an instinctive reflex that arises regardless of who or what they encounter. One could see how an instinct to humanize could make the student less likely to use freedom of speech in ways that are painful, even in situations where the student had no specific training, prior exposure or experience. Teaching humanization might create an underlying habit for students of privilege to find connection with the social identities and personal values of others that they do not yet have exposure to or understand. Teaching humanization might also help marginalized students to better connect with students of privilege, even when the barriers include ignorant and painful speech and actions. Having humanization taught this way on college campuses might help tailor reactions and counter-reactions to ignorance, allowing greater willingness for openness between agent and target groups.

In essence, humanization should be further studied and researched to be used as a

critical preliminary passive and reflexive mental skillset that influence the way students see and behave towards others. The hope is that humanization would occur *before* intergroup dialogue, and not the other way around. Teaching humanization could facilitate student development through a capability for deeper connections and empathy. This may be key to bringing healthier civil discourse to college campuses, more naturally, broadly, and effectively, all the while still protecting our freedom of speech, and simultaneously continuing our society's progress on social justice reforms.

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