Can Developing Virtues Improve Dialogue Across Political Difference?: The Case Study of Philosophy 291: Dialogue and Civil Discourse

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Abstract: After the polarizing 2016 presidential election, I heard from many distressed students who felt they lacked the skills or confidence to have difficult conversations with those who disagreed with them politically. In response, I developed a course that aims to help students grow in the virtues and skills necessary for listening and dialogue, putting these to use discussing controversial issues including abortion, gun rights and regulations, cancel culture, speech on campus, immigration, environmental policy, and kneeling for the national anthem. In this article, I make the case for foregrounding virtues such as attentiveness, curiosity, intellectual humility, and empathy to promote good dialogue and prepare students to engage productively across difference. Then, I describe the course design, share qualitative results from student reflections, and highlight insights that are applicable across disciplines. Finally, I address practical obstacles and ethical concerns that have arisen when teaching polarizing topics and offer responses to these challenges.

Keywords: polarization, intellectual humility, empathy, curiosity, attentiveness, virtues.

The days following the 2016 presidential election were emotionally charged for many Americans, including faculty. In the first postelection meeting of my three philosophy classes, I invited students to share their responses to the event, hoping to create space for them to process an unexpected and polarizing election result. I knew these classes were split between Trump and Clinton supporters, having taken anonymous polls previously. This was not unexpected, since Saint Mary's College—a Catholic, women's liberal arts college in Notre Dame, Indiana—is quite ideologically diverse. To my relief and surprise, in each class we had engaging, instructive conversations.

In one class, a student expressed a desire to replicate the conversation and questioned why she was unable to have such conversations with friends or family outside her philosophy classes. In response, the class brainstormed about why such conversations were so difficult: because students held assumptions about the views of their peers or professors, which kept them from speaking up; because such discussions escalated so quickly that students were fearful of the fallout with friends and family; because students felt they lacked the knowledge and skills to engage in meaningful conversations about controversial issues.[1] One student proposed a solution: an entire course that would help students overcome these obstacles. Convinced of the need and up for the challenge, I decided to create Philosophy 291: Dialogue and Civil Discourse. In the 5 years since that conversation, this class has become my favorite class to teach, and to my surprise (for a philosophy elective), there is sufficient demand to run it every semester.

In this article, I describe the course design of Dialogue and Civil Discourse and argue in keeping with traditions of ancient virtue ethics and philosophical hermeneutics that the development of virtues such as attentiveness, curiosity, empathy, and intellectual humility can help students engage more productively across difference. Student reflections from journals support these claims. Finally, I

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[1] A study by Larson et al. (2020, pp. 1-2) conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill offers evidence consistent with my students' speculation about perceived obstacles to productive discourse, including the self-censorship that occurs when students fear disapproval from peers and faculty.

respond to potential concerns raised by the course and highlight insights to be applied in various teaching situations.

Developing the Course and Recruiting a Diverse Cohort

In early 2017, as the entire country was in the grip of disordered political dialogue, I was excited to bring together students from across the political spectrum, because I believed helping students navigate polarizing conversations was an urgent and deeply philosophical project. In every class, I emphasize philosophy's ability to help us flourish.[2] If disordered dialogue is a real obstacle to flourishing—a reality confirmed by students' own accounts and data about the U.S. climate in general[3]—then I wanted to bring the philosophical toolkit to bear on this particularly dispiriting issue.

My idea was a one-credit-hour course to meet for 2.5 hr on six consecutive Tuesday nights. We would focus on one or two controversial issues each week. Readings available for each topic would include news and opinion pieces from a range of viewpoints—from left to right—that used reputable sources and verifiable data to support their claims. Students would keep a journal of their experiences in the class, in which they would respond to prompts asking them to reflect on issues, undertake exercises meant to help them evaluate arguments, investigate their own assumptions, and process their reactions to the discussions.[4] As a culminating project, students would host a conversation across difference with peers, friends, or family on an issue of their choosing. The grading would be pass/fail. Students who attended regularly, submitted the required journals, and completed the final project would pass. For our discussions, I picked the most controversial topics of the day: free speech on campus, immigration, abortion, gun rights/restrictions, privilege, cultural appropriation and Halloween costumes, affirmative action in college admissions, and kneeling for the national anthem. In the years since, I have swapped some of these out for other headline-making controversies, including confederate statues, cancel culture, Christian bakers and gay weddings, the Affordable Care Act, impeachment, mask mandates, racial justice protests, another contentious presidential election, and vaccine mandates.

Following social science research showing that personal, intergroup contact with those who have different experiences can reduce prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), I was committed to ensuring that the course would bring together students with a range of views, backgrounds, and experiences. Thus, students filled out a precourse survey that asked about issues they cared about, clubs they belonged to, and elements of their experience or identity that they wished to share. In course flyers, I emphasized that the course would not run without representation from across the political spectrum, so no one would be a "token" representative of an entire political party or position.

I was amazed at the diversity of the 25 students who signed up for the first run of the course. There were students who voted for every major party candidate, including Trump-loving Republicans and Trump-loathing Republicans, Libertarians, Hillary Democrats, and Bernie-crats. About 40% of that first class identified as left of center; 30% as right of center, and 30% moderate or none of the above, including several international students who were not aligned with U.S. political parties. Among the 25 students, 10 identified as students of color.

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[2] See King (2021) and Giebel (2021) for accessible arguments about how developing moral and intellectual virtues can help humans flourish, grounded in ancient and contemporary virtue ethics.

[3] According to the American Psychological Association's 2017 Stress in America report, 59% of Americans reported that "current social divisiveness causes them stress." See also Klein (2020) for a detailed examination of the history of polarization in the U.S. political system and the consequences of it for our contemporary identities.

[4] See course assignments and journal prompts in the Appendix.

In the subsequent 4 years, I have had similar success recruiting a diverse cohort of students. Demographic data from precourse surveys administered to three sections taught from 2019 to 2021 show that of the students who completed the survey, 25% were students of color (slightly higher than Saint Mary's overall average of 22% as of 2020[5]). With respect to political affiliation, 50% of those who took the course in 2019–2021 identified as liberal or left of center; 40% as conservative or right of center, and 10% as neither liberal nor conservative.

Building Skills and Virtues for Productive Dialogue

I was aware that bringing together a diverse cohort of students was important but complicated. I needed to equip students with skills for good conversation, but I also wanted them to come to see themselves as the *kind of people* who care about productive dialogue[6] and who could grow in the virtues that would help good dialogue more naturally emerge.

My approach to teaching and modeling virtues in the classroom was guided by historical philosophical traditions, specifically, ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophy and philosophical hermeneutics.[7] In the *Apology*, Plato's (ca. 390 B.C.E./1899) Socrates exhorts us to recognize that wisdom lies in knowing what we do not know and that philosophy requires us to interrogate ourselves *and* dialogue with others in pursuit of truth and a flourishing life. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1925) encourages us to organize our desires to pursue happiness and a goal-directed life. To do this, we must be habituated into choosing the right thing to do, as we become the kind of people whose character makes it easy to know how to act well in particular circumstances. Stoicism recognizes that training for virtue requires practical exercises over a lifetime and incremental progress, just as athletic training requires physical exercises; Stoicism also emphasizes our participation in communities and our obligations to others (Sherman, 2021). Moving forward hundreds of years, Hans Georg Gadamer's (1960/1994, pp. 265–285) philosophical hermeneutics reminds us that we are always already situated in a particular context and see the world through the lens of that context; becoming aware of this lens is essential for productive dialogue.

Taken together, insights from these historical traditions led me to construct a class that would help students see themselves as the kind of people who valued productive dialogue across difference, who saw such dialogue as necessary for a flourishing community, and who would practice their way into habituating these behaviors. To this end, I centered several virtues in the classroom and built practical exercises, journal activities, and discussion prompts with an eye to helping students become aware of their own habits and dispositions and grow in those virtues that are requisite for good dialogue.

My initial motivation to create such a course grew out of a combination of student requests and my own commitment to philosophy as a path to living well. As the course continues to evolve, I

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[5] See p. 23 of the *Fact Book 2020-21*, Saint Mary's Office of Institutional Research,
https://www.saintmarys.edu/files/2020/11/2020-21%20Fact%20Book.pdf

[6] When I speak of "productive" as opposed to "disordered" dialogue, I understand productive dialogue to describe dialogue across difference that results in greater trust (Allen, 2004) and disordered dialogue to describe dialogue that erodes trust. As such, productive dialogue may lead to greater understanding of an alternate view (though not necessarily common ground or even respect for the view), curiosity rather than defensiveness, or neutral feeling that makes collaboration possible. Disordered dialogue may lead to the experience of feeling silenced, misunderstood, or estranged.

[7] In contemporary philosophy, the subfield of virtue epistemology has much to contribute on theoretical questions about moral and intellectual virtues. For a brief and accessible history of key contributions in virtue epistemology (VE), see Baehr (2011, pp. 6–12). For a practical guide to how insights from VE can be applied in the classroom, see Baehr (2015). Though I see VE as providing important insights into these questions on a complementary and parallel track, my own inroad to questions of virtue development has been more explicitly historical.

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find that helping individual students build skills for dialogue is inseparable from a larger project of building trust among students who come to the discussion with very different views and deep suspicion of the views of others. Here, I follow Danielle S. Allen's account of political friendship as a key means for trust production. In her view, folks who engage across difference need not have "intimate friendships" or agree on everything, but rather: "the best one can hope for … is that political friendship can help citizens to resist the disintegration of trust and achieve a community where trust is a renewable resource" (Allen, 2004, p. 156). Her account of political friendship, drawn from Aristotle, makes a compelling case that autonomy, reciprocity, and sacrifice (along with equity and power sharing) are necessary for the kind of engagement that produces trust (Allen, 2004). Further, Allen emphasizes the role that practice and habituation play in building habits for political friendship, arguing that those who start as strangers can grow in these habits "simply by acting as if they were friends" (Allen 2004, p. 156). Allen's account illustrates how cultivating virtues as individuals and together in community can set the stage for building trust that makes productive dialogue across difference possible.[8] In this section, I identify the key virtues the course emphasizes, offer concrete ways to practice these virtues in the classroom, drawing on my own experience and evidence from social science, and share qualitative evidence from student reflections collected over 4 years that suggests students notice virtue development in themselves.

Attentiveness

I introduce attentiveness by encouraging students to offer attention[9] to themselves and to the person with whom they are engaging, and by attending closely to both the *context* and the *goal* of a conversation before beginning.[10] One attends to the context of the conversation by asking "is this a good time for this conversation?" To determine whether to proceed, students consider whether both they and their interlocutor are open to learning something new.[11] Here, students quickly see why social media is

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[8] Allen places her view in the context of political liberalism, arguing that "liberalism originated in efforts to solve the problem of radical distrust in political life." However, her self-described "modest contribution to liberal political theory" posits that liberal institutions themselves cannot dissolve distrust, but rather that particular habits of citizenship, "when coupled with liberal institutions, can do so" (p. XX). Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the promises and pitfalls of liberalism, I follow Allen in emphasizing the importance of fostering particular habits of character in citizens, and I believe a citizenry that demonstrates these habits and virtues could help sustain a healthy liberal democracy.

[9] The difference between "paying attention" and "offering attention" is key here. The typical idiom of "paying attention" makes attention transactional, whereas "offering attention" highlights the nature of the gift that one can make of one's attention to others. I am grateful to my colleague Molly Gower for highlighting this.

[10] Attentiveness is not always included as an intellectual virtue, but Watson (2018) argues that it should be, because "the student who is attentive to the teacher, subject matter, or class discussion is more likely to learn and engage in the discussion or task, than the student who is not. Attentiveness both sustains and focuses inquiry" (p. 362). In this, Watson follows Baehr (2015), who describes the attentive student as one who "*listens*. Because he is there and personally engaged and invested in what is being taught or learned, he listens carefully and openly. He is eager to understand and even to appreciate what is being said" (p. 94). While I think these characterizations are helpful for the way they highlight listening and engagement, I would point out that my own understanding of attentiveness differs from these by more explicitly emphasizing attention to self, and by highlighting attention to the context and goal of an encounter. I would note that Allen (2004) also highlights the importance of attention to self and others, placing the value of this habit in a political context, saying 'citizens, too, need to cultivate such habits of attention in respect to their fellow citizens … [in which] they are attuned to the balances and imbalances in what citizens are giving up for each other" (p. 134).

[11] One further note about context: Being attentive to context in this way will mean that the energy for these kinds of conversations will vary widely. Those who are systematically ignored, silenced, or subject to continual microaggressions will likely have less energy for these kinds of conversations. It is important to make sure students understand that they do not owe anyone their emotional energy or perspective. These engagements can be enormously satisfying, if the context is right, but should not be universalized as an obligation.

rarely a good context for hard conversations, since politically charged posts are usually fueled by outrage rather than a genuine desire to learn from another. I encourage students to note whether they are tired, hungry, or emotionally exhausted before beginning a complex conversation. Neuroscience and personal experience are clear: The reasoning and planning part of one's brain cannot function at its best if one is in need of a snack or a nap (Sapolski, 2018). One student summed it up, saying: "Because of this class, I knew to pay attention to context and decide whether it was or wasn't a good time for conversation, which a few times, it was not."

The second thing we carefully attend to is the *goal* of a conversation. I encourage students to enter a conversation with the aim to *understand* more about someone else's view or their own view, rather than to *persuade*.[12] If the goal is to *persuade*, one is less in control of the outcome, and more likely to become defensive and frustrated. But one can come to *understand* a bit more about oneself or others even in encounters that do not go as well as desired.

In the classroom, particular concrete practices help students attend to themselves and others in pursuit of productive conversations. For example, (in nonpandemic times) I always include snacks and we spend our break snacking and chatting together informally. Second, students know that they are always welcome to pass or to refrain from participating in a particular conversation. Third, students respond to weekly journal prompts that ask them to reflect back and to offer attention to their own experiences of the prior week's conversation, including how they may wish they had reacted differently and what they have learned about themselves from frustrating encounters.

Empathy

Empathy is closely connected to attention. The definition of empathy I operate with is offered by Lori Gruen (2015), who writes specifically about "entangled empathy," which she defines as:

> An experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognize we are in relationships with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another's needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes and sensitivities. (p. 3)

I appreciate the emphasis here on people's embeddedness in relationship and community, as well as her emphasis on both emotion and cognition. [13] Students often enter the class assuming they must avoid all emotion and talk dispassionately, but this is contrary to the aims of the course. Rather, attending to self and others requires room for expressions of experiences, emotions, and values, since these inform how we understand ourselves and how we view the world; they also help us share what

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[12] For a discussion of the distinction between understanding and persuasion in dialogue across difference, see Peirce (2016), who argues that productive dialogue (which she calls "civil discourse") should emphasize "reaching mutual understanding instead of achieving persuasion" (p. 83). She also outlines strategies for shifting this focus in the classroom.

[13] Empathy is not a virtue that often appears in lists of intellectual virtues (e.g., Baehr, 2015, and King, 2021, do not include empathy in their discussion of intellectual virtues). However, I am persuaded by Gruen's account of entangled empathy and its connection to the ethics of care (2015, see especially Chapter 1) that to engage with others across different experiences, empathy is very important. Myisha Cherry (2017) applies Gruen's view of entangled empathy in a way that is particularly helpful for the dialogue across sociopolitical difference, saying "Entangled Empathy keeps us mindful of differences in context and experiences so that we do not see difference as a barrier to empathy" and in this way emphasizes that entangled empathy is "about trying to make our relationships better" (pp. 447–449).

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matters most to us.[14] But being able to learn from these expressions in others—and growing in empathy—requires the skill of good listening.

To develop listening skills, students are given prompts for discussion that ask them to connect their views to their experiences and values; they then go around in a circle, only speaking when it is their turn. When not speaking, they focus on listening to understand rather than to reply. To do this, I ask them to act as detectives, connecting the dots between other students' values, beliefs, and experiences. Since our ability to listen is shaped by our own experiences and our "situated knowledge"[15] (Flower, 2003), listening requires actively attending to the experiences shared by others and noting how they are different from one's own. As one student said of these exercises:

> The first day we learned about how to be a good listener, and I did not realize before how bad I actually was. … After learning how to listen, to be curious about the other views, and to empathize, I learned so much more, and that is what I appreciate the most.

Another student recognized her growth in this area as well: "I thought it was going to be very tense that everyone was just going to debate. … To my surprise this was not the case! … I can tell that I have become a much better listener."

Curiosity

As students grow in the ability to listen and recognize the connection between listening and building empathy, I also emphasize the value of curiosity. When we listen, we may hear views that are disagreeable or indefensible to us.[16] This stokes defensiveness, which tends to short-circuit productive conversation. Instead, I encourage students to notice defensiveness and become curious about the provocation. One can ask oneself: "Why am I feeling defensive? What values of mine are being poked here?" I encourage students to share the personal experiences that formed their views and the values that undergird their initial defensiveness. I encourage them to ask curious follow-up questions to better understand the relationship between others' views, values, and experiences. Several classroom activities give students an opportunity to plot their views on a spectrum, for example, when we talk about gun or abortion regulations, which speakers should be welcome on campus, or how to balance personal freedom with public health. I have found it productive to ask them to use curiosity to determine why they draw the lines they draw and then to engage with others to determine what underlying differences exist in their views, values, and experiences; this approach tends to stoke curiosity and diffuse defensiveness or debate.

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[14] On the role of emotions in dialogue, some see emotion as risky, given that "appeals to emotion are very powerful, and they are frequently used by manipulators of language to sway us in a particular direction' (Zompetti 2105, p. 188). Though some see this wariness as originating in Aristotle's concern about manipulating the passions of listeners, Allen (2004) argues that one who "seeks to inspire trust must be especially concerned with the pains, or losses' of those listening" (p. 150). I agree with Allen that productive dialogue benefits from vulnerability in participants and the ability to listen for the emotions in play during a conversation.

[15] Flower (2003, p. 39) defines situated knowledge as "the body of powerful, unarticulated, experientially based interpretive resources both parties bring" to conversation. Gadamer (1960/1994, p. 269) describes this (often) prereflective set of assumptions as "fore-meanings and prejudices."

[16] Curiosity has been defined as "the virtuous appetite for knowledge" (King 2021, p. 41) or "a tendency to wonder about things, to ask good questions, or to explore new ideas or points of view" (Baehr 2015, p. 59). I agree with these characterizations but would like to emphasize the role curiosity plays in opening one up to learning from others, and how it acts as an antidote to defensiveness, which closes people off to new information. Interestingly, psychology and neuroscience have confirmed that curiosity actually aligns with learning more and is positively reinforced biologically, since "at peak curiosity, dopamine pathways in the brain fired with increased intensity" (Brewer 2019, p. 4).

Practically speaking, in any classroom, curiosity can be nurtured by helping students practice formulating curious questions in response to defensiveness. [17] In one exchange between a progressive, prochoice student and a conservative, prolife student during a discussion of immigration policy, the progressive student asked: "How can you be so hypocritical as to believe that fetuses' lives matter but the lives of children in cages at the southern border don't matter?" To note the defensiveness but move into curiosity, I encouraged her to reframe it in the following way: "I know that you deeply value lives of vulnerable children, so I'm curious about how you think about that value in connection with current practices of immigration enforcement?" Leading with curiosity and connecting her question to values the student had already expressed led to a much more productive engagement and gave the other student a genuine opportunity to reply.

Students are quick to recognize the development of their curiosity throughout the course. As one student remarked:

> I will take many skills from this class and carry them with me throughout my life. The main takeaway I have is I need to always stay open minded and be curious. By doing this, I will be able to listen to others' views and ask questions to figure out why they feel the way they do or think a certain way.

Another noted:

> I have many friends on the other side of the aisle and as we engage in these conversations, I ask questions to figure out why they feel the way they do. Taken from what I have learned in class, I am able to … see where they are coming from. … In all, I am a better listener, because of this course.

Other students confirmed these sentiments. One said: "This class reminded me that at the end of the day, there are people and experiences behind those arguments and the most instructive place to be is being curious about how someone came to hold their beliefs." Another remarked: "This class has made me more curious and open to hearing more ideas that do not coincide with my own." These students demonstrated that emphasizing curiosity in theory and helping them find new habits that enabled them to be curious in practice helped them shift into a growth mindset, which encourages "students to see intellectual abilities not as fixed but as capable of growth in response to dedicated effort, trying new strategies and seeking help when appropriate" (Yeager et al., 2019). A growth mindset can help reduce defensiveness (Dweck, 2016). Research has shown it can also help students be open to conversations about socially and politically charged issues; further, faculty in any discipline can help students grow in this openness to other views by themselves adopting a growth mindset and modeling it in the class (Fotuhi, 2020).

Intellectual Humility

Becoming curious about the views of others can lead one to confront one's limitations, by investigating one's own knowledge, views, and experiences. In other words, I want students to excavate and interrogate the assumptions of *self* and *others*.[18] Intellectual humility, as a virtue, enables people to

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[17] See Watson (2018) for a discussion of the skill of good questioning, and in general, for a discussion of how to distinguish a virtue from a skill.

[18] See Gadamer (1960/1994, p. 269): "This is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither 'neutrality' with respect to content nor the

recognize the limitations of their own perspective and encourages them to seek out the views of others, both to test their own positions for clarity and consistency and to constantly be reminded that their experiences are not universal and their knowledge is not complete.[19] One can and should be a person of conviction, but that conviction should come with a desire to continually test one's views for weak spots and unsupported assumptions. Social science research has confirmed the value of "intellectual humility (IH) conceptualized as 'a non-threatening awareness of one's intellectual fallibility,'" suggesting it correlates with "greater openmindedness, empathy, prosocial values, and tolerance towards diverse ideas and people" (Krumrei-Mancuso & Newman, p. 990). Allen (2004) beautifully describes the opportunities presented by such humility: "Engage a stranger in conversation across a racial, ethnic, or class divide and one gets not only an extra pair of eyes but also an ability to see and understand parts of the world that are to oneself invisible" (p. 167).

In class, the students engage in several concrete practices to nurture intellectual humility. First, they work to excavate their own prejudgments in reflective journals and small group discussions by asking what assumptions—cultural, political, religious—undergird their views and how they are different from the primary assumptions of others. Second, I encourage students to investigate the limits of their own knowledge, consistent with the finding that "SIH [sociopolitical intellectual humility] may be most impactful when individuals are provided an opportunity to reflect on the fallibility of their thinking on a particular topic" (Krumrei-Mancuso & Newman, p. 1011). For example, in one exercise, before a discussion on immigration, I have students write everything they know about U.S. immigration policy on paper before we start. Students realize that they know very little about the policies themselves, and this primes them to learn from others—sometimes from students who have themselves immigrated or who are children of immigrants, who may have direct knowledge and experience. In response to this discussion, one student wrote:

> After my small group's discussion on immigration … I felt a lot more compassion and empathy towards those who come into the United States illegally. … None of my friends from home or from Saint Mary's are from Hispanic backgrounds and in this class, I have gotten to hear thoughts and opinions from people who are. Exchanges with these girls have … been extremely eye-opening for me and in some sense transformative for me. … I began to hear the stories from girls in our class about their families and how long it took them to gain citizenship in the U.S. Their families were and are looking for the same American dream that my grandparents and great-great-grandparents came to the U.S. to find.

Many student responses indicate growth in the area of intellectual humility. For example, one student wrote: "I had this preconception about the political and religious beliefs about my classmates that was pretty far off point." Another reflected: "It was surprising, and slightly amusing, that I made the same assumption that has so often been used on me. This was a good reminder that I'm not immune to these kinds of assumptions." Another responded:

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extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings." Here I interpret "text" broadly to include any "other" with which one engages. Flower (2003, p. 55) makes a similar observation about situated knowledge, recognizing that when this remains "tacit, uncommunicated" then it can lead to different constructions of meaning.

[19] Robbiano and Scager (2020) persuasively argue that intellectual humility requires openness to others' views and care. They also offer a helpful survey of the virtue epistemology literature on intellectual humility and emphasize the importance of coming to recognize assumptions that (often unconsciously) affect one's views and may lead to "the tendency to reject new ideas" if they remain uninvestigated (p. 48).

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What has surprised me most about this experience is how often I am able to have a good conversation with someone who has totally different views than my own. … I was raised to think that I was always right in my beliefs and that made me feel that the world was an us against them in regards to personal beliefs.

Overcoming Obstacles and Responding to Challenges

Though I love teaching this class, I am mindful that there are risks involved. I teach because I want to help students flourish, so I must be attentive to not putting students—particularly vulnerable students—in harm's way. Below I share concerns I have considered as I teach the course.[20]

Objection 1: If You Call for Civil Discourse, Are You Not Risking Tone Policing and Silencing Oppressed Groups?

When I began preparing to teach this course, I confess that "civil discourse" seemed to me a benign expression.[21] If pressed, I may have said that most of the time, being able to engage civilly with those who disagree would aid flourishing; in my own experience, this had been true, and I was blinkered by my own experience, as we all are. Since that time, I have benefitted from engaging with the valuable insights of others, including the work of scholars of color, and I am persuaded that the language of civility can and has often been used in ways that are incompatible with progress on many issues—in fact, silencing and tone policing are key plays in the oppressor's playbook.[22] Though the course still bears the title Dialogue and Civil Discourse (for now), I share with students the complexities of the term "civil discourse." I emphasize the difference between seeing civil discourse as a tool in the toolkit

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[20] Given the scope of the paper, I have chosen to discuss in detail the two related issues that caused me the most concern about potentially doing harm (i.e., concerns about calls for civility and concerns about instrumentalizing students from underrepresented groups.) In preparing to teach the class, I considered a number of objections to the project, not treated in detail here. For instance, I worried (a) that we were treating complex content issues in one evening each; (b) that these conversations might entrench students' views and create more polarization; (c) that 6 weeks was too limited; and (d) that whatever benefits students might experience would not last or translate to the "real world." Some of these concerns I believe I can respond to satisfactorily (e.g., (a) I ensure that students know this is not a course about content mastery, but rather about skill building). Concerns b, c, and d require ongoing assessment so I continue to collect qualitative and quantitative evidence to assess the course results in the short term and, eventually, in the longer term.

[21] My positive view of the term civil discourse was based on an understanding like that of the National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD) at the University of Arizona. Peirce (2016) shares the following description of their mission: "The Institute is predicated on a deep belief that vigorous but respectful debate, consistent with the First Amendment, is a necessary ingredient for successful problem solving in the civic arena. The Institute's role is to encourage civic leaders to embrace vigorous debate in a way that allows for diverse perspectives to be shared, for complex issues to be discussed thoughtfully, and for challenging topics to be explored without resorting to invective and personal attacks" (p. 76). In fact, the NICD currently emphasizes the importance of empathy, humility, and listening to understand among their "key principles and best practices" (University of Arizona, 2021). Clearly I share many of their aims and views about best practices, though I have concerns about the use of the terms "civil" and "civility."

[22] Myisha Cherry (2018) raises important concerns about silencing through anger policing and demands for civility. She says: "I am concerned with anger policing evaluators using 'calm and civility' to assert their power over others and as a way to silence others" (p. 60). She also makes clear that the anger-policing evaluator who risks silencing others "wants to feel better and is not interested in placing himself or herself in the shoes of others in order to feel what angry agents feel so that he or she can understand the anger and thus approve or disapprove of it" (p. 59). By this description, those who have developed the virtues described above as intellectual humility, empathy, and curiosity will be less likely to act in this silencing way since they *will be* interested in understanding the experiences of others. See also Scott (2015) and Palumbo-Liu (2014) who makes the case, offering examples, that campus administrators' calls for civility have silenced vulnerable groups.

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and seeing it as an end goal. As a tool, for some people at some times, it is the right tool, but sometimes it is exactly the wrong one. I believe that growing in the above virtues will help students build the ability to distinguish when it is best to employ civil discourse and when it may be more appropriate to speak truth to power, to protest, or to participate in civil disobedience in the face of extreme injustice.[23]

Objection 2: Does This Course Risk Subjecting Vulnerable Students to Harm or Instrumentalizing Their Experiences to Advance the Learning of Other Students?

There is a related concern that encouraging students to speak from their own experience will risk instrumentalizing the experiences—and perhaps suffering—of some to educate others. Of course, I do hope that students will feel comfortable sharing and that all students will learn from the experiences of and encounters with other students. However, to avoid merely instrumentalizing some students for the benefit of others, I respect the agency of the students involved. The course is not required for any students, so each student has opted in and can opt out at any time. Further, every student has volunteered to participate knowing it includes students with diverse views and backgrounds, and that we assemble for the purpose of discussing divergent views on difficult issues. Any student is free to speak up, leave, or withdraw from the class at any time (since it is pass/fail, withdraw does not affect a student's grade point average).

Additionally, I insist that our classroom must be free from personal attacks and false, unsubstantiated claims, but I warn students from the beginning that I cannot protect them from all discomfort. In fact, discomfort is a key part of philosophical reflection and can be instructive in teaching us about ourselves, others, and the world. As one student put it: "Throughout the course, my discomfort acted as a way of informing me on how to present my own opinions thoughtfully. I had to think about the underlying causes of being uncomfortable."

I also do not protect students from the discomfort of hearing a frank and authentic response about how their comment has impacted a classmate. In one particular exchange, a Black student responded to a White student's dismissal of the concept of White privilege by saying directly that she felt dismissed and unheard. The White student became emotionally distraught at the idea that she had come across as dismissive or lacking in compassion. It was a difficult and uncomfortable engagement, but in subsequent reflections, the White student said that she had never heard these experiences of discrimination firsthand from a peer before, and that they were eye opening. The Black student expressed that she was glad she had a chance to directly respond to a view she knew many peers held but did not often express in class. She admitted the exchange had been exhausting for her but described being glad to have participated in it. Not every student will find it instructive or helpful to engage in this way, and as educators we must be completely clear that no student, particularly students from underrepresented groups, has an obligation to educate majority students; but for those who wish to participate in these ways, I do not want to paternalistically foreclose the opportunity to do so. In this class, students may choose to let themselves be uncomfortable to learn or perhaps tutor others. Some describe this as empowering rather than enervating, though it clearly can be both. As one student said:

> It was hard to be present and committed to a conversation sometimes, it is hard to put energy into having a conversation that could go south and not be as meaningful, but it is something

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[23] Here I only mean to say that I believe growing in these virtues will help a person make good decisions in complex circumstances. I do not mean to suggest that in this six-session course we cover topics such as when or how to participate in various kinds of advocacy or activism.

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I look forward to doing. I look forward to growing and pushing the boundaries of my comfort and knowledge.

Further, cultivating the virtue of attention helps students attend to their own needs and energy and helps them determine for themselves when the context is right for a productive engagement, and when it is not. The following excerpts from one student's reflections show her desire to learn *and* the appropriate boundaries she is committed to maintaining:

> This campus is obviously predominantly White. As a minority, I can say that my experiences in an ethnocentric society have not been all good all the time. And when these experiences happen on an almost regular basis, it is hard to not look at the majority and think "they're all the same." … This is why I am in this class—to learn and get a better grasp on what makes us all different. [Written after the first class session]
>
> I think I've learned how to be more open to discussion and also put less stock in my own assumptions of certain people. … I think in any disagreement I have down the line, I will be better off because I won't have certain stereotypes weighing me down. Of course, there are limits to that. I will never respect or give the time of day to any argument that deserves no respect as a real argument. [Written at the end of the course]

Transformation

My hope is that giving students opportunities to practice these skills, and to reflect on how the skills are connected to the virtues discussed above, will help them become habituated into practices consistent with productive dialogue. One student summed this up thoughtfully:

> I had an uncharacteristically heavy conversation with my roommate the other day about the implications of calling myself a feminist, and it had already become a habit for me to remind myself to listen to understand instead of listen to respond. That is not something I would have ever told myself to do before I was in this class and had so many opportunities to practice it. I am glad that that skill has been integrated into my thoughts so deeply that it felt very natural for me to do.

As a teacher and a person, I know this habituation has been at work in my own life. I notice that practicing the virtues we engage in class has become habitual in my professional and personal relationships. I routinely check my own defensiveness and transition to curiosity in engagements with my spouse or notice myself trying (though often failing) to get clear about the different lens my teenagers look at the world through relative to my own. As a teacher, these changes show up in many ways in my classes: I now use small group discussion much more frequently; I give students more opportunities to lead discussion and craft curious questions; I encourage them to connect their experiences to their views when possible; I help students recognize defensiveness and transition to curiosity.

Perhaps the most significant way I have been affected by teaching this course is with respect to modeling intellectual humility in the classroom. Early on in my career, I remember feeling extremely uncomfortable if a student asked a question I could not answer. I now model delight at an opportunity to learn something when prompted by a clever student question. I am also happy to admit when an activity does not go as planned, and I share stories about instances when I have learned that my own

views have come up short. I know that for very good reasons,[24] some faculty would find this too much vulnerability in the classroom, but when appropriate, I think it can be powerful for students to see intellectual humility modeled by academics who are known for their commitment to accuracy, expertise, and authority.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have described the structure and aims of Philosophy 291: Dialogue and Civil Discourse. I have shown how classroom climate, exercises, journaling activities, and discussion prompts aim to help students develop skills and virtues for productive dialogue across difference. I have also suggested that these skills and virtues can bear fruit in various teaching settings, and in the lives of faculty and students beyond the classroom.

My primary hope is that these skills and virtues will help students address a pressing sociopolitical problem affecting our democracy and will enrich their lives by aiding their flourishing. Though I cannot promise this is the experience of every student, I can offer the words of several students who demonstrate the benefits of gathering together to do this hard work:

> Before the class, I will be the first to admit that I wasn't particularly tolerant of people on the other side politically. … While my beliefs have not changed at all, my level of tolerance and acceptance has drastically changed for the better. … [This class] made me more empathetic to others and made me want to put myself in someone else's shoes before making generalizations or stereotyping.

> I had never actually met a Trump supporter in real life, and because of the "liberal bubble" I lived in, I often found myself, and the people around me, stereotyping Trump supporters as science-denying, misogynistic racists—to put it lightly. So, actually meeting and having a productive conversation with someone on the complete opposite end of the political spectrum as myself was an incredibly humbling experience.

> This class opened my eyes to a variety of viewpoints I had not been exposed to before. I had only heard certain buzz words about my beliefs from people who generally lean left … I knew these words did not describe myself or my identity at all. … Additionally, I realized I may have generalized people into groups as well … after talking and interacting with people, I realized that the person I may have voted for hurt them more than I realized. Though I would not change my vote and I do support [President Trump] and most of his decisions, it made me more empathetic to the views other people held about the president's actions.

In these comments, I see evidence that students are subjecting their assumptions to critical scrutiny, growing in the desire to understand others and themselves, and marshaling curiosity in their engagements with fellow students. Whether we use the language of ancient virtue ethics, philosophical

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[24] It is well documented (e.g., see Flaherty, 2021) that women and faculty of color are disproportionately penalized for vulnerability in the classroom and are less likely to be seen as competent. Obviously, this complicates a recommendation that instructors should work hard to exhibit intellectual humility in the classroom, in the ways I have described above. Again, attention to context and respect for the particularities of individual experiences should lead us to be skeptical of universalizing recommendations. These are merely offered as reflections of teaching dispositions that have been helpful for me and may prove helpful for others, if appropriate.

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hermeneutics, or contemporary social science to describe such shifts, my hope is that these skills and attitudes will benefit students in their academic work and in their lives beyond academia.

Acknowledgments

Appendix

Appendix 1. Reflective Writing Assignments for PHIL 291: Dialogue and Civil Discourse.

A. Pre-class Journal Assignments (1–2 pages each)
1. Pre-reflective commitment inventory: Think about your core beliefs and how they inform your political views. How are your beliefs influenced and informed by your background, your family, your religious beliefs? Have you embraced or distanced yourself from the beliefs you were raised with? Describe an experience that has been formative in developing your passion for a particular viewpoint.

2. Information gathering: Choose an article that is written from a partisan perspective that you tend to agree with (in other words, an article that starts from a particular point of view and aims to convince the reader of that point of view). Cross-check the claims of this article with several different reliable sources, including one with a different partisan lean. Is the initial article being fair and honest in its assessment of the issue? If someone disagreed with the article, what would their strongest objection against it be?

3. Evaluating arguments: Pick a controversial issue that we have talked about in class or that you are following in social media and/or the news. Find two media opinion pieces from trustworthy sources that have very different responses to this issue. You can pick your own or choose something from the course reading guides. Briefly describe what you think is the strongest argument from each side. Which side do you agree with more and why?

4: Interrogating our responses: In response to what comment or discussion in class have you felt the most defensive, frustrated or angry? What is it about this comment/discussion that led you to feel this way? Were you satisfied with your reaction to this experience? If not, how might you have responded differently?

What discussion has been positive, eye-opening or transformative for you? What was it about this experience that made it positive rather than negative? Did you or someone else do something specific to help facilitate this productive engagement?

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5: Reflecting back: What has surprised you most about this experience? What would you change about your engagement with the class? What did you appreciate the most? In what ways can you imagine this experience will carry over into your life outside of class? Have you had any experiences outside of class so far where you've been able to practice skills for productive dialogue across difference?

B. Post-class Reflection Assignments (about one page): Write a mini-reflection in your journal about the most recent discussion.

Mini-reflection 1, to be completed AFTER our first class meeting: What excites you about the class? What are you nervous about? What obstacles or particular issues do you anticipate may make it hard for you to engage with those who disagree with you? Is there anything you would like me to know about you heading into the class that would help me be a more effective teacher for you?

For mini reflections 2–5: What questions were raised for you by our discussion? What issues are more complicated now? What issues are clearer? What surprised you, led to defensiveness or stoked your curiosity?

Mini-reflection 6: Reflect on the conversation you facilitated. Did it achieve what you had hoped for it? How did you feel about acting as a facilitator? What skills did you need to use to facilitate?

C. Facilitated Conversation: Each student will choose a topic and a group of their choice (friends, family are fine, so long as there is some diversity of views represented; can be live or virtual). Facilitate a conversation, using some of the skills you've learned. Prepare to informally share your experience in our last class, and write your last journal about this.

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