Teaching

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Thorny Exchanges on Campus Can Hold Educational Value

By Dan Berrett

Politically charged ideas are a mainstay on many campuses. So is the controversy they provoke.

When handled poorly, such incidents trace a familiar arc: Initial expression begets umbrage, which spurs real or perceived overreaction, followed by vows to better handle highly charged disagreements the next time.

A sociology professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder recently had to ward off administrators’ concerns that her in-class skit about sex workers would offend students. In October, students at Brown University ended a guest lecture by Raymond W. Kelly, who was then New York City’s police chief, by booing him off the stage.

Thorny exchanges in classes and on campus can provide great educational value if guided skillfully, according to professors in disciplines like communications, education, history, and political science who lead programs described as including difficult dialogues, transformational conversations, or deliberative democracy.

Such efforts have emerged as examples of how higher education can foster a stronger sense of civic engagement in students. If they can learn to carefully listen to and consider opposing views, the thinking goes, they will mature into citizens who can deliberate and find common ground in fractious times.

But such conversations often prove difficult for faculty members to carry out and can be risky, especially for those without tenure.

Some institutions can be timid in defending controversial discussions on the campus. Those institutions may find themselves less able to advance the cause of knowledge, says...
Caryn McTighe Musil, director of civic learning and democracy at the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

"We’ve always had to exist with this contradictory commitment to inquiry," says Ms. Musil, whose organization in 2012 published a report, "A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future," that challenged colleges to assume a greater role in civic engagement. The association will offer more than a dozen sessions on the subject at its annual meeting in late January.

"We are committed to asking tough questions and to exposing students to multiple points of view, some of which they detest," she says.

Brown is still figuring out how to respond to the disdain expressed so loudly by some of its students. One remedy will be an effort to train faculty members in moderating difficult conversations and to work with student groups to sponsor constructive dialogues outside of class, says Liza Cariaga-Lo, associate provost for academic development and diversity.

"In the wake of the Ray Kelly incident, I think we all came to recognize that we often don’t come into these situations prepared to be able to talk to one other about issues that divide us," she says. "A university is, in fact, the place where we should be having these conversations."

'Rupture Point'
Advocates for facilitating constructive conversations about controversial subjects cite the educational benefits of the experience. Such arguments also tend to be made in support of liberal education and engagement on issues of diversity.

Like liberal education, civic learning is promoted as helping students wrestle with messy problems that have no clearly defined answers, a skill that will help them as voters when they evaluate policy trade-offs. It is also a skill that many employers say they value.

Participating in difficult dialogues about politics or values is thought to spur a healthful cognitive disjunction in students, which causes them to take a fresh look at their unexamined views—much the way that substantive conversations about race and ethnicity have been shown to improve critical-thinking skills.
Jeffrey B. Kurtz, an associate professor of communication at Denison University, calls the moment of dissonance a "rupture point."

One such moment happened this past fall, when students in his course on rhetoric, sports, and culture proposed discussing the notorious rape by two high-school football players, and humiliation in social media, of a girl in Steubenville, Ohio. The Denison students debated to what extent blame should be placed on football culture.

Several students, including football players and residents of football-crazy hometowns, initially ascribed responsibility to the athletes alone but found themselves growing uncomfortable, Mr. Kurtz says.

Questions arose: Was there something to the case against football culture? "We were stopped in our tracks," Mr. Kurtz says. When the class session ended, he told his students that they could no longer retreat to bland agreements to disagree.

Such interactions can be particularly fruitful when they happen with people from outside the campus.

Students in some political-science courses at Wake Forest University, for example, have debated the merits of Social Security with senior citizens in Winston-Salem, N.C.

At first, the students favored privatizing the program, while the elderly residents defended it as is, says Katy J. Harriger, a professor of political science. She guided the discussion, following ground rules to discourage interruptions and generalizations. Participants were asked to identify common ground and areas of disagreement.

By the end, Ms. Harriger says, nuance had crept in. The students saw the need to preserve the safety net; the older participants acknowledged the value of means-testing and worried about the debt being passed to future generations.

**Political or Partisan?**
While a classroom can be a good place to cultivate the skills needed to carry out difficult dialogues, that environment also has shortcomings. Classrooms are inherently inauthentic laboratories for democracy, Ms. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan wrote in

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The power dynamic between teacher and student often short-circuits any pretext that equals are freely exchanging ideas. And professors who have developed expertise in a subject are not always good at getting out of the way of a discussion or at being neutral moderators.

Above all, such discussions are very hard to conduct effectively, says Nancy L. Thomas, who directs the initiative for the study of higher education at Tufts University's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

"We know that discussion-based teaching gets results. To avoid it is bad teaching," she says. "But we don't do it, because we don't really know how."

One stumbling block for many professors is confusion between the political and the partisan.

Examining the power dynamics underlying given issues is often thought to be acceptable; advocating for ideological positions is not.

Writing in The Chronicle in 2003, the outspoken professor Stanley Fish warned faculty members not to "teach peace or war or freedom or obedience or diversity or uniformity or nationalism or antinationalism or any other agenda."

"Of course," he continued, "they can and should teach about such topics—something very different from urging them as commitments—when they are part of the history or philosophy or literature or sociology that is being studied."

Many professors avoid any charged discussions. About half of all faculty members report that they "often" or "very often" encourage their students to discuss local, state, or national issues, according to the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement. Twenty percent urge their students to organize other people to work on such issues.

Part-time lecturers and instructors report that they encourage their students to discuss and engage on political issues less
frequently than their tenured peers do, according to the survey.

Many faculty members who seek to facilitate difficult conversations try to help students sort through their own reasoning and its consequences, says Richard M. Battistoni, a professor of political science at Providence College. "What we're talking about is getting students to be more effective citizens based on their own values."

When faculty members push students to examine their thinking, they need to do so respectfully, says Tufts's Ms. Thomas.

She describes how a professor asking a question about, say, the role of religion in public life might step into a minefield. Suppose the faculty member asks why a student feels that the teachings of a religious leader should influence public policy. The words might seem open and nonjudgmental, but the tone might be perceived as hostile. "You can put your hand on your hip or glare at them," she says. "The inference is there."

Instead, she says, a professor could ask a student to explore why he or she is suggesting that position, or to share personal examples that support the statement. "What you're really doing is expressing interest in peeling the onion instead of expressing interest in taking on that view," Ms. Thomas says.

When their ideas are threatened, students, like many other people, choose to disengage. If that happens, students won't learn to talk with one another across ideological divides, and the opportunity to meet on common ground will be lost, perhaps irretrievably, says Matthew Hartley, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania.

"If they can't do it in college," he says, "they sure aren't going to do it later in life."

How to Teach Students to Have Hard Talks

Encouraging Facilitating controversial classroom conversations on controversial subjects in class in an effective way often depends on preparation. Experts cite common approaches that tend to make such efforts successful:
Establish ground rules. Spend time with your students at the beginning of the semester agreeing on how to engage in debate, says Jeffrey B. Kurtz, an associate professor of communications at Denison University. Generate a list of rules and post it. If the effort to set ground rules sputters, try flipping the question. Ask students what happened when a discussion in which they were involved broke down or became polarized: Did it result in name-calling, interruptions, accusations, and defensiveness? Then stake out rules that would support more-positive results the opposite.

Emphasize storytelling. Encourage students to speak from their own experiences rather than make sweeping generalizations. "They should claim the 'I position,' so you assert what you think," says Katy J. Harriger, a professor of political science at Wake Forest University.

Frame the discussion. Conduct extensive research on an issue and propose reasoned, substantive approaches to that issue that reflect the best arguments of each side. Ask students what aspects of each side appeals to and concerns them. Ask them to sift through the possible each side's consequences and trade-offs of each position in identifying how they might take action. The goal, says Jan R. Liss, executive director of Project Pericles, a nonprofit group that promotes participatory-citizenship programs at colleges, is for students to think through the other side's position— and not by thinking about "why they're wrong, but understanding that there's another perspective and why there is that perspective."

Ask questions in an open-ended way. When a students offers throws out an ideas that requires substantiating, consider asking them to explore why they made those suggestions, or to offer some examples from their lives that support the statement, says Nancy L. Thomas, director of the initiatives for the study of higher education at Tufts University's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. "It's how you frame the entire discussion, and how you frame individual questions," she says.