
The Politically Engaged Classroom

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Although college and university professors utilize many different styles of teaching, pedagogies, and approaches to learning in the classroom, some are ideal for fostering student political interest, knowledge, and agency. This chapter focuses on discussion-based teaching as a pedagogical approach for faculty members to create political learning opportunities for their students across disciplines. The chapter draws from five qualitative case studies of colleges and universities with higher levels of student political participation, a research project from Tufts University's Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. These case studies provide a deeper understanding of how faculty members from across different disciplinary fields can integrate political learning into their classrooms through discussions on controversial social and political issues among students with diverse social identities, ideological perspectives, and lived experiences.

Over the past few decades, colleges and universities have revitalized their efforts to advance student civic engagement. Unfortunately, other than in particular disciplines, these initiatives are usually apolitical in nature. As a result, students graduate lacking the skills in political discourse, critical thinking, problem solving, and collective action that they need to address complex and divisive public issues and events in American democracy. For this study, five institutions were identified because of their unusually high levels of political and electoral student engagement across disciplines. Through qualitative case studies at these five institutions, researchers at Tufts University's Institute for Democracy and Higher Education examined their campus climates for political learning and engagement in democracy and identified structural, human, political, and cultural characteristics common to the five campuses.

This chapter examines one of those characteristics: discussion-based teaching using matters of political consequence as content, embedded across disciplines, which emerged as a dominant theme in our research.¹ Faculty members and students who participated in our focus groups and interviews often mentioned these types of experiences. In our research, controversial issue discussions in the classroom emerged as a predominant attribute of highly politically and electorally engaged colleges and universities. The faculty members at these institutions took their role seriously by learning to facilitate dialogue across differences effectively, and their institutions provided these faculty members with the opportunity to learn these pedagogical skills. Specifically, they sought personal and professional development training in discussion-group teaching; established inclusive classroom dynamics; invited student perspectives based on the students' diverse backgrounds, lived experiences, and opinions; and introduced challenges for students to consider new perspectives on an issue.

HIGHER EDUCATION'S INCONSISTENT CIVIC COMMITMENT

Higher education serves complementary purposes in American society. Ideally, individual students pursue learning to advance their careers and quality of life while simultaneously developing as socially responsible, engaged citizens. Collectively, educated Americans provide the foundation for US economic prosperity and for public problem solving and policy making guided by principles of freedom, equal opportunity, and concern for the common good. This civic mission has been affirmed repeatedly since the establishment of early institutions of higher education, perhaps most clearly by President Truman's Commission on Higher Education, which identified higher education as democracy's necessity.² The report identifies the goals of higher education as a means to "bring to all people of the Nation ... Education for a fuller realization of democracy in every phase of living ... and for the application of the creative imagination and trained intelligence to the solution of social problems and to the administration of public affairs." More recently, the US Department of Education, the White House, civic leaders, and scholars in both higher education and political science have challenged the academy to recommit to learning that strengthens and ensures the future of democracy.³

Historically, higher education's commitment to student civic learning has fluctuated. The most recent wave of interest in civic learning surged over 20 years ago in response to concerns over declines in social capital and the nation's civic health, a problem vividly captured in the shifting behaviors of Americans choosing to bowl alone rather than in leagues.⁴ Colleges and universities admirably responded to this problem by bolstering student civic experiences such as volunteerism, service learning, public interest internships, and student community-based research. They also pursued new institutional strategies, such as the creation of civic offices and support for community-university partnerships for local problem solving.

While valuable, these efforts have fallen short of educating for democracy. Civic engagement experiences are typically designed to be apolitical, and indeed, students are cautioned to avoid political conversations in their field placements.⁵ Political learning generally engages small groups of students in particular majors or with specific interests. As a result, students gain a sense of empathy for others and a duty to serve but not necessarily the knowledge, skills, and commitment to tackle social and policy problems.

Some institutions, however, can demonstrate high levels of student political engagement. Seeking a purposeful sample for this study, we conducted a quantitative analysis using the National Study for Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) database. By calculating both actual and predicted aggregate student voting rates for each college and university participating in NSLVE, we could identify institutions with higher-than-predicted student voting rates. Over the past two years, we visited nine of these institutions and conducted qualitative case studies to observe and understand their campus climates for political learning and engagement in democracy. This chapter is based on an analysis of the first five of the nine institutions.

We found that these uniquely politically engaged campuses manifest particular attributes and characteristics including a student-centered mission; a demonstrated commitment among faculty, staff, and students to building campus community, a culture of caring, and high levels of social connectivity; a commitment to diversity and intergroup relationships as well as a strong equity purpose; collaborative governance and decision-making that included students; and robust student activism and other forms of political action. These are reviewed in our other chapter in this book, "Politics 365: Fostering Campus Climates for Student Political Learning and Engagement." In this chapter, we share findings on ways that the classroom experience supported students in developing knowledge, skills, and interest in public affairs, problem solving, and policy making. On the campuses we studied, teaching political issues and democratic engagement skills is not relegated to courses in political science or interdisciplinary programs. Every discipline recognizes and teaches its relevance to public life. We dedicated the entire chapter to this particular attribute because it was pervasive across all of the campuses we visited and because both faculty

and students were remarkably consistent in reporting on the role that classroom discussion-based teaching using public issues as content played in student political learning and development.

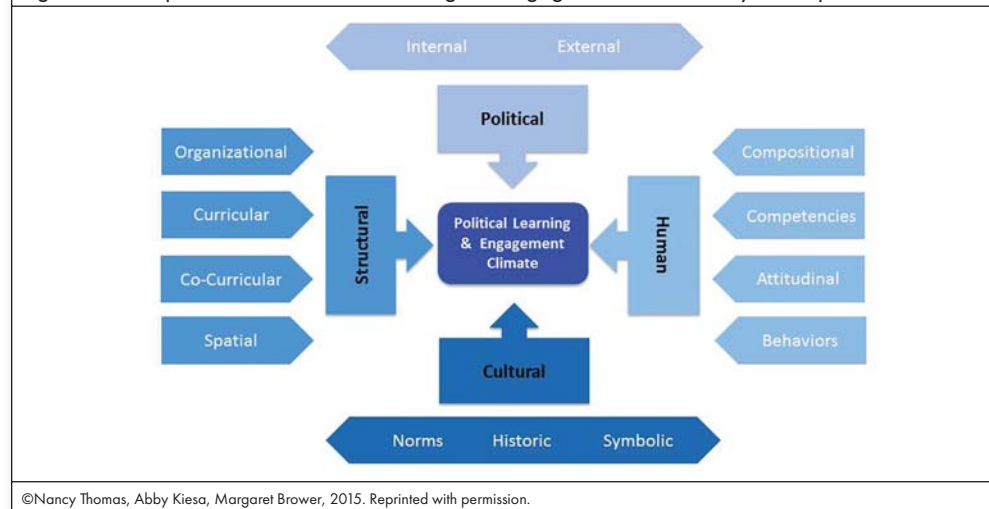
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research on organizational climate grew substantially in the late 1960s and 1970s.⁶ In the late 1990s researchers started examining “common patterns of important dimensions of organizational life or its members’ perceptions of the attitudes toward those dimensions”⁷ in higher education.⁸ While the term “climate” has been defined a number of ways, Ryder and Mitchell describe it as, “people’s attitudes about, perceptions of, and experiences within a specified environment.”⁹ Hurtado et al. suggests that campus climate studies can be used to “identify areas for improvement [so that institutions can] achieve educational goals.”¹⁰

Assessing campus climate is a complex task requiring attention to a broad range of factors. Examining campus climate for diversity, Hurtado, Clayton-Pederson, and Allan considered four institutional characteristics: history, structures and compositional diversity, psychological climate (perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about diversity), and interactions among diverse members of the campus community.¹¹ Other scholars study campus climate in relation to perceptions, behaviors, and expectations.¹² Campus climate can also be studied from an institutional leader perspective, focusing on cultural assumptions and institutional practices.¹³ Bolman and Deal study complex organizations by examining them from four perspectives: structural, human resource, symbolic, and political.¹⁴

None of these scholars specifically examined an institution’s climate for student political learning and engagement in democracy. Addressing this gap in the literature, we augmented the Bolman and Deal framework¹⁵ and constructed a conceptual framework for campus political learning and engagement with some distinctions: we supplanted the “symbolic” frame with a “cultural” frame to reflect other literature identifying an organization’s culture as critical to institutional climate. Our framework also distinguishes between political forces internal to the organization and those that are external, an important difference given the role that public officials, state election laws, and local civic health might play. The framework also included dimensional subcategories that illustrate the complexity of colleges and universities (see figure 2.1). This framework informed the design of our mixed-method study to examine campus climate for student political learning and engagement in democracy.

Figure 2.1 Campus Climate for Political Learning and Engagement in Democracy Conceptual Framework



METHODS AND SAMPLE

We selected the case study institutions based on a quantitative analysis of institutional student voting rates. While voting may not be the only form of political participation, it is a fundamental civic act and arguably a gauge of student interest in public affairs. Being able to measure empirically a civic act and then reconstruct the student experiences that may explain that act is a unique research opportunity. Indeed, most studies of student civic learning measure the effects of a particular experience (e.g., service) on individual student development. Having actual individual level voting data provided a compelling basis for this research. Further, by visiting multiple institutions, we could observe different student experiences and explore the extent to which these institutions shared attributes.

The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) at Tufts University is a large dataset of student voter registration and voting records. Launched in 2013, NSLVE now has data for more than 900 American colleges and universities nationwide, representing a proportionate number of four-year public and private colleges and universities as well as a significant number of community colleges. The NSLVE dataset includes nearly 8.5 million de-identified student records obtained with permission from each institution. These enrollment records are housed at the National Student Clearinghouse, a nonprofit organization that serves as a national repository for 96% of students enrolled in accredited, degree-granting US colleges and universities. The NSLVE dataset also contains publicly available individual registration and voting data provided by Catalist, an organization that collects all publically available voting records and makes them available for academic research. The process of matching enrollment and voting records was completed by the National Student Clearinghouse, which then removed all student identifiers and sent the de-identified records to us for analysis. With these data, we calculated an actual student voter registration and voting rate for each participating college and university, broken down by demographic factors such as age, field of study, and voting location.

When this study began, the dataset contained approximately 2.3 million college student records from 219 participating colleges and universities. We conducted a quantitative analysis to select the first four colleges and universities for these climate studies ($n=219$). By the time we completed those visits, the dataset had nearly doubled to 4.4 million students and 473 campuses. We used the same method to select a fifth campus from the larger dataset ($n=473$).

To voting and enrollment records, we added institution-level variables available through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) as well as civic data collected by the US Census Bureau and analyzed by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). We then ran a multiregression analysis to predict voting rates for NSLVE colleges and universities ($n=219$) using three variable types: individual student variables (e.g., gender), institutional variables (e.g., institution size), and civic variables (e.g., social cohesion at the state level, restriction on voter registration). We used voting as a proxy for political engagement. Based on this regression model, we calculated a predicted voting rate for each institution. Comparing the actual and predicted voting rates for all campuses in the study, we identified campuses with positive residuals of at least 5 percentage points—campuses we called “positive outliers.” To select from among the institutions with high residuals and identify a diverse set of institutions, we considered factors such as campus size, geographic location, populations served, and Carnegie classification. The names of the positive outlier institutions are confidential, but they include

- A four-year public located in a suburb of a large city in the Northeast; enrollment 4,000; residual 13.3 percentage points above the predicted voting rate,
- A four-year private located in a small city in the East; enrollment of 2,200; residual 5.5 percentage points above the predicted voting rate,
- A two-year public located in a mid-sized city in the Midwest; enrollment 19,500; residual 7.9 percentage points above the predicted voting rate,

- A four-year public located in a large city in the Southwest; enrollment 13,000; residual 5.2 percentage points above the predicted voting rate, and
- A four-year public located in a suburb of a midsized city in the Southeast; enrollment 5,500; residual 10.2 percentage points above the predicted voting rate.

As the database has grown, we have run the regression repeatedly, and the five institutions we selected remain positive outliers.

CASE STUDIES

Visiting five institutions between April 2014 and April 2015, we collected the data through semistructured interviews and focus groups with students, faculty, and staff. On each campus, a minimum of six interviews were conducted with no fewer than two senior administrators, three staff members, and one dean of students or vice president of student affairs. We held a minimum of six focus groups on each campus with no fewer than 15 faculty members and 15 students. At larger institutions, we increased the number of students and faculty by adding focus groups. We worked with each institution to ensure that the focus groups consisted of a diverse group of students and faculty representing a broad range of disciplinary and cocurricular interests.

The semistructured interviews and focus groups were open-ended and developed according to our conceptual framework. In total, 74 interviews and focus groups were conducted with 237 participants. All interviews and focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Our conceptual framework also informed the codebook for analyzing these data¹⁶ and a hierarchical “coding scheme” was used to organize the codebook.¹⁷ This structure allowed us to synthesize the data into broader categories before using cross-case axial coding to identify relevant themes emerging from these codes.¹⁸ To analyze the data, we conducted a repeated review of all interview and focus group transcripts and selected co-occurring pairs of codes with higher-than-average frequencies that aligned with the each section of the conceptual framework.

DEFINITIONS

We use the following definitions to frame our research. *Civic engagement* refers to individual and collective action to identify and address social needs and problems. Civic engagement (sometimes used interchangeably with “community engagement”) reflects a broad range of actions, including volunteering, voting, donating money or goods to charity, organizing fund drives for a cause, helping neighbors solve community problems, community organizing, and social entrepreneurship.

Political participation is often envisioned as engagement with government. We view political participation as involvement with democratic systems and practices, which would include citizen-driven action, with or without formal government structures. Political engagement can include a broad range of activities including engaging in the electoral process (voting, campaigning, running for office, registering, and voting), community organizing (mobilizing others to act together to address a public problem), advocating (writing and publishing commentary and speaking publicly on matters of public concern), and convening (protesting or organizing deliberative forums to facilitate change).

Political learning refers to classroom and cocurricular experiences that increase student understanding of and ability to navigate and shape systems and structures of power, particularly political (just systems for policy making) and economic (how resources are distributed) in the context of a pluralistic society across differences of social identity, ideology, or life experiences.

Drawing in part from Gutmann and Thompson,¹⁹ we define *democracy* as a form of government in which free people have an equal opportunity to participate in and shape the social, political, and economic systems that affect their lives. Democratic learning and engagement

involves examining the tensions around the practical application of democratic principles of liberty, equality, individual prosperity, diversity and inclusion, and shared responsibility for the common good. While *educating for democracy* has no partisan leaning or ideology, the process and goals are clearly political.

FINDINGS

As indicated, this chapter concerns only the “structural” frame and the “curricular” dimension in our conceptual framework. All five of the case study institutions in the study manifested pervasive habits, embedded across disciplines, of classroom discussions about current events, policy disputes, cultural and ideological diversity, and controversial political issues, and for this reason we chose to focus on this finding in depth. At these institutions, we observed faculty members discussing how they often integrated current events and policy debates into their teaching approaches. In particular, four major themes emerged as core characteristics of these teaching approaches:

- *Training and preparation:* Faculty using discussion-based teaching actively sought training to develop their discussion teaching skills.
- *Establishing classroom dynamics:* Faculty established classroom dynamics conducive to successful discussion by building relationships and trust among students. Some techniques included establishing classroom ground rules, encouraging dissent, and fostering an inclusive atmosphere for learning and effectively managing conflict.
- *Diversity as a pedagogical asset:* Social and ideological diversity among the students in the class was used as a pedagogical asset.
- *Introducing dissenting viewpoints:* The professors introduced missing and dissenting perspectives and played “devil’s advocate” to press students to think critically and broaden their own perspectives. This was particularly true when classes lacked compositional diversity.

TRAINING AND PREPARATION

We found that faculty members using discussion-based teaching actively sought support for facilitating discussions on controversial or intercultural topics. In particular, faculty sought professional development opportunities to improve their intergroup facilitation skills. How they developed these skills varied.

At one of our case study institutions, a small group of professors shared the concern that they felt unprepared to work with the increasingly diverse student populations attending the college. They brought civic organizations to campus to conduct trainings in public deliberation. They attended two diversity trainings, including a “trust building” workshop. They also formed an informal community of practice in which participants shared readings and experiences. Over time, they actively held themselves out as people who were attendant to student social identity in both the classroom and in their faculty advising roles. They named themselves “Agents of Change” (pseudonym) and identified themselves publicly as part of this group by posting a notice on their office doors. Soon, others at the college sought the same training, which eventually became associated with the faculty development center on campus. More faculty members sought the training, and at the time of our research, over 85 professors had become Agents of Change. In addition to continued workshops and trainings, they also gather six times each academic year to discuss challenges and opportunities for people of color on campus. The original Agents of Change now run internal trainings for other faculty. Whenever a task force or committee is formed, the administrator convening the group ensures that at least one or two Agents of Change are involved. Faculty explained that while Agents of Change began as a unique, grass-roots faculty initiative with no institution financial support, the group feels otherwise supported across campus, including by the administration.

At another institution, the office of civic engagement served as a resource for faculty by hiring external consultants to conduct trainings on how to incorporate diversity and civic issues into the classroom. That office was a well-known place for running workshops on white privilege. Numerous faculty and students mentioned participating in these workshops and explained how this experience changed the way they thought about privilege and power in and beyond the classroom.

ESTABLISHING CLASSROOM DYNAMICS

Faculty members at our case-study institutions actively sought opportunities to make classroom discussions political and socially relevant by challenging their students to consider diverse perspectives, and they viewed the management of these discussions as an important skill, while also recognizing that their students were uncomfortable with conflict or emotional about a topic. Instead of avoiding these interactions, they relied on skills and strategies, such as pausing and taking some time to encourage students to “check their temperatures” and reenter the discussion. Faculty members then proceeded to manage the classroom and create opportunities so students could respectfully disagree with another and grow from these challenges.

Successful discussions were carefully planned. One faculty member shared, “you want [students] to feel that they can say something that not everybody’s going to agree with, and that’s a challenge sometimes.” Creating that open classroom environment requires that faculty lay the groundwork by building relationships and trust among the students, establishing classroom guidelines, encouraging dissent, and managing conflict. By establishing the right classroom dynamic, faculty members could encourage tangents, sometimes serving as reflective moments, without losing control of the learning.

At one institution, a unique first-year composition course was used to teach students how to engage in political or controversial issue discussions. Rather than study literature, as is commonly the practice, students in this course examined controversial public issues. They then learned how to frame the issues, take the perspectives of others, argue and debate, present written positions, and reflect on the process. One student said, “She had a different opinion, and I had a different opinion, but even though we had different opinions, we still could come to some kind of compromise.” Because most students took this elective, faculty members teaching other courses could rely on a certain level of understanding among students about respect, perspective taking, argument, and finding common ground.

Faculty members also established a tone of civility and respect. One student explained:

We were able to have a legitimate discussion. Yes, people disagreed, but we were able to do it in a calm manner and respect each other’s opinions. It really made the class that much more worthwhile and informative because you were able to get differing opinions and maybe even question your own perspective, whereas in the beginning, it was everyone was so cut throat, my opinion is the only one that matters, and yours is wrong. But it was all about the environment that [the professor] fostered for our debates.

When necessary, the professor might intervene and pause the conversation to manage incivility: “Sometimes it’s necessary to just stop the conversation or the dissent[er] and then just say, ‘Let’s step back for a moment and watch what’s happening here. Is there a better way for us to process this than calling each other names?’” This professor did not stop the conversation. Rather, he managed conflict by creating a pause during which students could reflect on their emotions and words. One student who had experienced this type of classroom management explained:

We had a lot of controversial debates in class but only once did [the professor] have to shut it down. But for the most part he managed it very, very well, with people being able to voice

their different opinions. And he made you stand up for what you believe because, regardless of whether you agreed with what he said, he would always play the devil's advocate and he wouldn't let you answer "just because" or "because of this."

Discussion can be intimidating for some students, and one faculty member explained how he draws out reticent participants or students who have not yet fully formed their arguments. He spoke of knowing his students well enough so that he could "just tell" when someone wants to speak but is not confident enough to "chime in." Creating an inclusive classroom means encouraging all students to share contrasting yet sometimes underdeveloped arguments.

DIVERSITY AS A PEDAGOGICAL ASSET

Compositional diversity at the institutional level: Most of the institutions we visited served diverse groups of students, and on those campuses, faculty and students emphasized how diversity enriched student learning. At one institution, the students were both socially and ideological diverse. Another institution served a student population with a significant number of veterans and students over 30, and many faculty talked about how age diversity improved the learning experiences of younger students. One is designated by the Department of Education as a Hispanic-serving institution. One faculty member described typical interactions in her class: "We had anti-choice, pro-choice, we had gun control, no gun control. All these kids from different points of view, they all respected and enjoyed each other's company and had a group hug in the end."

At its most basic level, cultural diversity enriches the student experience by facilitating intergroup interactions and relationships. This is particularly significant in a country in which Americans self-sort into homogeneous communities where they talk and work with people of the same culture, ideology, and values.²⁰ One faculty member explained that one white student had never spoken to a black person before taking her class, and by interacting with black students and even engaging in heated and controversial debates, the white student developed an appreciation for her peers' different perspectives. Another focused on age diversity and shared a story involving a Spanish class in which an older student explained how speaking Spanish had increased the effectiveness of her hospital work because she could communicate with Spanish-speaking patients.

Religious diversity can be used to increase learning for democracy. At another institution, there was a large Christian student population on campus. Yet, faculty members would challenge their students to be critical of religion by creating dissenting discussions in the classroom. These conversations were difficult. One student met with her professor after a contentious class debate and asked her why she constantly critiqued her religion. After realizing her professor also identified with the Christian religion but was trying to challenge the class to consider different perspectives, she realized the value of perspective-taking on developing her beliefs. She shared:

[My professor] said sometimes she goes against the gradient with Christianity because half the class at the beginning raises their hands and says they're Christians anyway. So she has seen a lot of people have their faith deepened even though she's going against them because, I kid you not, she would say stuff and I'd be like, "I have never heard that in the Bible before." I would literally go home, and I would open my Bible and try to find that, or I would talk to somebody I knew who knew something like that and it caused me to dig deeper into it. Even though she wasn't gung ho for it, she was saying things against it; it caused me to look harder.

At these particular institutions, faculty drew from and integrated the students' individual life experiences, ideological perspectives, and social diversity to make the course materials accessible and relevant and to provide students with opportunities to practice democratic engagement. For example, one of the institutions had a large health sciences department with a significant portion of students from low-income backgrounds. A faculty member there described how he taught the subject matter by exploring the implications of the Affordable Care Act for his students personally. He asked, for example, whether or not people should be required to pay a fine

if they could not afford health insurance. He described the experience to us: “When it relates to their own bodies and their own lives, they’re very motivated to talk about it. ... Obamacare matters because it’s happening to them.”

Although faculty members provided opportunities for students to incorporate their own diversity into the classroom experience, this approach should not be confused with tokenism. Faculty members do not call on low-income students or veterans and ask for their perspective on political topics. Instead, they integrate content into the classroom curriculum that creates spaces for students to share their diversity of experiences as assets to the discussion.

INTRODUCING DISSENTING VIEWPOINTS

When compositional diversity is lacking, faculty introduce dissenting views: For institutions in our study with less compositional diversity in the student body or for classes at diverse institutions that, for some reason, draw a less diverse set of students, authentic political discussions required the intentional introduction of perspectives “not in the room.” This approach was particularly relevant to students with more politically conservative views who were on campuses where students are perceived as predominantly liberal. These conservative students felt that they could not share their dissenting points of view in the classroom. Therefore, this approach was particularly important for these select students who felt their perspectives could not be voiced more freely and naturally.

Many professors address this problem by playing “devil’s advocate” to introduce dissent among ideological homogenous groups of students. Although all of our institutional case-studies supported this approach, institutions with more homogenous student populations explained the utility of inquiry and constructing learning experiences and environments among like-minded students. At one institution, faculty members ignited political conversations by using controversial reading assignments, films, and news media clips. A faculty member from this institution explained, “I think it’s more to get them knowledge about what’s going on, as opposed to, of course, trying to get them to pick a side or maybe think about what side they are on. It’s more about knowing how to deal with people in a political environment.” Another strategy used by faculty members from another institution included using course texts for constructing dissent in the classroom. One faculty member explained how students engaged with this exercise, stating that students will “say flat out, ‘I disagree with you and here’s why,’ and I find that as long as it’s rooted in the text some way then it doesn’t feel personal and they’re always coming back to the claims and the arguments which makes it a little easier to disagree.”

Do effective discussion teachers share their own political perspectives? This question arose repeatedly in our study, and there was no consensus on this subject. One faculty member explained:

I keep my views out of it but simply ask questions, be the devil’s advocate, regardless of the way the class tends to go, and try to take the other point of view. I find that students are very willing to look at the other side of it and maybe not agree with it, but at least understand where [other] people are coming from.

Others, however, felt that being “authentic” meant that they disclosed their viewpoints to students but also assured them that the class would be balanced and representative of all viewpoints. The goal is to present all perspectives, but insist they are based on evidence, not just opinion.

Another way to present multiple and opposing points of view is to have the students play devil’s advocate with each other. One faculty member pairs students and asks them to defend opposing sides of an issue and then share with the class not only the positions on the issue, but also their experience as “opponents.” She explained, “I am just trying to teach the whole picture.” Students also recognized the value of participating in these discussions in which multiple perspectives were considered.

The professors invited expression about diverse lived experiences and perspectives drawing from the students in the class. When that diversity of perspectives was introduced into the classroom—whether it was by leveraging the existing diversity or constructing dissenting spaces for students to consider viewpoints not present in the classroom—students learn important lessons about democracy.

DISCUSSION-BASED TEACHING INFLUENCES BOTH STUDENT AND INSTITUTIONAL CIVIC IDENTITY

The ways in which students experienced discussion-based teaching on matters of political consequence reinforced this finding. Repeatedly, students across these institutions confessed that their favorite courses involved discussions and debates in the classroom. One student described her experience as “practicing” politics:

It was a good class because we had one central thing that we could be talking about and different viewpoints made the conversation so energetic. I may feel one thing, and you feel the exact opposite on every point that I presented, and then after a while you started to see that the people who did not agree started to come together and defend each other as well as expand on what they were talking about. By the end of the class you’d have two different sides when everybody started off disagreeing and they’re just doing back and forth. There’s no real winner because in politics and philosophy, a question is always open-ended and so it’s open to interpretation. So I loved that class. It blew my mind.

Students said that this approach encouraged their development as critical thinkers and civic leaders. Indeed, one student shared his experience:

[The professor] would keep on pushing you to kind of make you get to the bottom of what you believed [and that] really make you think. And he made everyone speak. You couldn’t just be passive because a lot of times people want to just be passive and just, “Yeah, I agree with what you said” or “Pretty much what she said” and [the professor] was like, “Okay, well, why?” And so I really, really appreciated that class. It made me think about a lot of things differently and find out why I believed [particular ideas] because sometimes I would start saying why I thought I believed it and [realized] maybe I didn’t really know.

Other students from across institutions and disciplines echoed similar sentiments as students discussing issues such as prostitution or affirmative action. These topics are political in nature, but these classrooms themselves were described as places where students not only engaged with the political dimensions of issues but also practiced politics by perspective-taking, debating, reframing issues, and questioning one another. These are higher-order skills associated with critical thinking and democratic practices. A diversity of perspectives and experiences was commonly referenced as an important piece of these discussions. Engaging in discussions of political consequence in the classroom, students learned to challenge their personal beliefs and to question rules in society.

One faculty member explained that his students are “allowed to find their voice here. Once they find their voice they become dangerous, they become protestors, they become activists. . . . [They] already had that in them but now they can fully express that. Well guess what? What I just told you about the mission of the college fits that perfectly.” This faculty member described student political engagement as aligned with the institution’s identity.

Students also shared this perspective explaining that they left the classroom thinking about their civic roles differently. As students reflected on their experiences with political learning in the classroom through discussion-based practices, they shared how their sense of agency changed. Some students explained that the classroom experience provoked them to redefine their ideas of democracy and reconsider their campus as a democratic space. One student re-

flected, “I think that you can be politically involved without necessarily having to participate in voting or democracy at a national or even state level. You can be politically involved even on campus or within special interest groups.” Other students echoed this change in perspective as they described their involvement in leadership activities on campus. Some students referred to their campus as its own democracy.

Although most of the data suggests students at these case-study institutions thrive in classroom political discussions, some expressed a different experience. Not all students feel comfortable with dissent in the classroom. For example, one faculty member explained some of his students’ experiences with caution and shared, “But I think there’s a lot of hesitancy and nervousness in classrooms still. You know: ‘Am I going to say the right thing? Do I talk about these issues? Am I smart enough?’” Students do not gain critical thinking and civic skills from these discussions if they do not participate in them. Therefore, while most students on these campuses are benefiting from participating in discussion-based learning, strategies are still needed to engage students with lower confidence levels in the classroom to ensure all students are gaining these skills.

CONCLUSION

On all five case study campuses, faculty across the curriculum employed skilled, discussion-based teaching with current events, policy debates, and controversial issues as content. While we were surprised at the consistency across campuses, we know from other studies that students develop political interest and efficacy when they have opportunities to express their opinions and discuss controversial issues.²¹ Studies have also demonstrated that deliberation among socially diverse students has long-term impact—they are more engaged in the political process than their peers who did not experience deliberative practices either inside or beyond the classroom.²² Further, more conventional pedagogies—teaching through lectures, memorization of facts, and assessment through recall—have been criticized as less effective.²³ Students forget what they learn in a lecture,²⁴ but when they engage in the process of coconstructing knowledge through inquiry, discourse, and problem solving, they learn and remember what they have learned.²⁵ In contrast to lectures and textbooks without corresponding interactive teaching methods, discussion-based teaching helps students develop advanced skills in reasoning, intergroup understanding, critical thinking, and the transference of knowledge to problem solving.²⁶

Discussion-based teaching using public issues was an attribute common to all five of the campuses we visited, and students repeatedly reported the transformational effect of those experiences as having improved their learning and shaped their political interest. Nonetheless, as with most qualitative research, our study cannot confirm a direct causal relationship between teaching method and voting. Student interest in voting may be affected by other factors, such as external political influences (e.g., candidate visits or voter mobilization efforts). Pedagogical practices and political content in the classroom are one component of a campus climate, as discussed in our other chapter in this book, “Politics 365: Fostering Campus Climates for Student Political Learning and Engagement.” Additional research is needed to understand better the value of political classroom conversation to creating a robust campus climate for political learning and how this attribute works alongside the others identified in our study.

The political landscape in the United States has changed dramatically over the past 30 years, and arguably, during the 2016 election season. These changes include growing political and economic inequality, increasing partisanship and polarization among politicians and Americans more broadly, and public distrust of and disengagement from government systems and institutions. The next generation of citizens needs to do better. Since the burst of energy associated with higher education’s civic movement over the past few decades, US colleges and universities have been focusing on *individual* civic engagement and mostly apolitical learning experiences. The

shift needs to be toward the collective, educating students to explore new perspectives both critically and respectfully, to participate in difficult dialogues on matters of political consequence, to compromise and collaborate, and to engage in processes for building a stronger democracy. The classroom is the ideal place to *practice* these arts of democracy. ■

ENDNOTES

1. The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) data includes a breakdown of 2012 voting rates by disciplines. Among the 900 colleges and universities currently participating in NSLVE, education majors, for example, vote at the highest rate (56%) while students in the physical sciences, mathematics, and computer technology voted at rates of 41%, 37%, and 41% respectively. The average voting rates for these disciplines among the five institutions in this study, however, were as follows: physical sciences: 59%, mathematics: 53%, and computer technology: 45%.
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