

Fostering civility and constructive debate in a polarized society: How leadership educators can leverage diverse perspectives

Fostering
civility and
constructive
debate

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper highlights an assignment in a combination upper-division undergraduate and graduate civic leadership class at a Midwestern state comprehensive university. The three-part assignment challenges students' critical thinking skills and research capabilities while simultaneously necessitating the exploration of contrasting viewpoints on contentious issues.

Design/methodology/approach – Intentionally exposing students to diverse perspectives in a controlled environment.

Findings – We posit that the severity and frequency of these issues can be mitigated through focused efforts.

Originality/value – Students are better prepared to engage in civil debate on controversial topics, which continuously divide our communities, after completing a class using this pedagogical strategy.

Keywords Diversity, Transformation, Controversy, Civility

Paper type Technical paper

Issue statement

Kouzes and Posner (2017) posit that leadership is all about behavior – the acquired skills and abilities that allow people to more effectively and efficiently interact with others toward a common purpose. They have identified five core practices that exemplify leaders when they are at their very best; those practices are: (1) modeling the way; (2) inspiring a shared vision; (3) challenging processes; (4) enabling others to act; and, (5) encouraging the heart. The acquired skill directly relatable to this application brief and the associated assignment is on *challenging processes*. This skill centers on the exploration of innovative ideas and having an open mind. This is particularly important when divergent realities collide.

Divergent realities are the manifestation of diversity. Diversity can include race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, physical or cognitive ability, sexual identity, creed, socioeconomic background, age, military experience or status, learning style, personality, education level, geographic background, country of origin, language, marital status, caretaker status, occupation, religion/faith, etc. Attention to these attributes is increasingly necessary because of the nation's history of oppression and persisting implicit biases (Servaes, Choudhury, & Ashishkumar, 2022).

Even though non-dominant groups in many societies face challenges and leadership may look and feel differently among cultural variances, the evidence behind Kouzes and

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Posner's (2017) practices of exemplary leadership utilizing the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) is sound (Zagorsek, Stough, & Jaklič, 2006; Wei, bin, Noor, bintiMansor, & Awang, 2021). For the purpose of our work, we are also concerned about the diversity of thought and the opinions people hold that have been shaped and cemented through their unique lived personal experiences. Therefore, this brief and the related assignment is also directly linked to the *controversy with civility* element of the Social Change Model of Leadership (HERI, 1994). This element of the model recognizes the fundamental reality that differences in viewpoints are inevitable. Such differences should be aired but with civility which "implies respect for others, a willingness to hear each other's views, and the exercise of restraint in criticizing the view and actions of others" (p. 23).

As we contemplate the leadership zeitgeist of twenty-first century America (particularly in the political arena) there is a plethora of self-righteous indignation and intolerance of difference. Much of what we observe involves challenges – and not just challenging processes. Challenges that are often ideological and deeply rooted in values and beliefs. Unfortunately, such challenges often devolve into face-to-face or electronic shouting matches, or worse.

Given the current state of affairs nationally, it is crucial that colleges and universities are preparing students to navigate the complexities of social, economic, and political landscapes that are oft times quite volatile. It's not enough that we teach students to traverse more visible or common forms of diversity to maneuver through various intricacies, we also need to prepare students to tap into the differences in "identity-related knowledge and experiences" and utilize that information "as resources for learning" (Ely & Thomas, 2020, p. 115). This approach to learning accepts, includes, and celebrates differences that can be leveraged as a starting point for creativity and innovation (Kwon & Nicolaides, 2017) to problem solve and achieve goals.

We created a classroom assignment that supports the learning-and-effectiveness paradigm (Thomas & Ely, 1996; Ely & Thomas, 2020) by challenging students to actively engage in "others' perspectives, have difficult conversations, [and] refrain from blame and judgment" while supporting "learning, equality, and mutual respect" (Ely & Thomas, 2020, p. 122). This paradigm can help students to appreciate the fundamentally difficult work of finding common ground in an increasingly polarized society. Further, this paradigm acknowledges that homogeneity is not better – it's just easier. But more importantly, it affirms the agency and dignity of any group of humans and, in "doing so honors our own and others' humanity and gives our lives meaning" (p. 122).

The assignment we created was specifically designed to help students become more comfortable engaging with discomfiting content as the polarization among people has increased. In our literature review we offer an explanation of polarization and address key components that we contend are contributing to increased levels of polarization – conflicting moral convictions, incivility, distrust, and historical racism. Additionally, we share how these components have been exacerbated by social media.

Literature review

Humans have a need to belong to people or things that matter to them and there is empirical and theoretical support that connections and relatedness is both universal and fundamental (Pardede & Kovač, 2023). The need to belong is so strong, in fact, that people develop strategies to avoid the negative psychological and physical outcomes of being rejected or excluded (Loveland, Semesters, & Mandel, 2010; Pardede & Kovač, 2023; Premkumar, 2012). Unfortunately, the strong desire to belong can also lead to the negative consequence of polarization.

Polarization

Polarization is concerned with clustering individuals in a society in population groups in unambiguous ways. For example, people form groups around ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation. Polarization has become an area of increasing interest in investigation due to its function in explaining different phenomena such as social tensions and conflicts (Chkravarty & Maharaj, 2010).

When discussing dissention in group settings, Brafman and Brafman (2008) posit that when people are placed into groups, they form alliances, accept extreme stances, and give in to peer pressure: “in a group setting, the reasonableness of our thinking can be distorted and compromised” (p. 150). This is confirmed by Haidt (2012) who suggests that people will overlook self-interests and commit themselves to groups when they represent something larger and more important than their own self-interests.

Even group membership that is based on the most trivial of shared characteristics triggers both positive feelings for the *in-group* and negative ones for the *out-group*. Given that individuals typically categorize themselves into multiple groups, the hierarchy and identity salience must be considered. The more salient the affiliation, the more biased the individual’s beliefs about in-group and out-group members (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012).

Haidt (2012) proposes that once people become involved with a particular group, they experience a confirmation bias that is all but impossible for them to escape. They cannot imagine being wrong even when presented with facts to the contrary; particularly if those facts come from some place other than their moral point of view:

Morality binds and blinds. It binds us into ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on our side winning each battle. It blinds us to the fact that each team is composed of good people who have something important to say. (p. 366)

Moral convictions

In an attempt to better understand human interactions and dynamics, Skitka, Bauman, and Sargis (2005), sought to explain how *attitude*, *strength*, and *moral conviction* might impact a person’s social and physical environmental preferences. The authors hypothesized that “people should be less likely to get along well with those who do not share their moral convictions than with those who do not share their otherwise strong but nonmoral attitudes” (p. 899). To test this, the authors conducted four separate studies. Two of the studies consisted of random participants in public places (a large Midwestern airport, a bus station, and a train station) and the other two studies involved students from introductory psychology courses on a college campus. The results indicated that individuals prefer more social distance from others who do not have the same moral convictions. They also found that those with greater moral convictions were more intolerant of differences than were individuals with lower moral convictions. The authors obtained similar results when looking at group settings.

When a heterogeneous group with strong attitudes discussed how to resolve moral issues, they were less likely to demonstrate cooperation than when discussing resolutions for nonmoral issues. We contend that the unwillingness to cooperate with others is but one of a number of things that are contributing to increased levels of polarization in American society.

Incivility

Weber Shandwick (2019), in conjunction with two other entities, Powell Tate and KRC Research, started exploring civil discourse in public squares in 2010 and determined that the “perceived lack of civility in the United States had far-reaching implications and negative consequences for the nation” (p. 2) and it’s only become worse since then.

Per [Weber Shandwick \(2019\)](#), more than two-thirds of Americans think that the U.S. has a major problem with incivility which leads to bullying, harassment (verbal, physical, or sexual), violent behaviors, hate crimes, intimidation and threats, feeling unsafe, intolerance, discrimination, decreased community engagement, and feelings of isolation and loneliness (p. 3).

Currently, national “borders are being violated, cultures called into question, traditional values renounced, beliefs challenged, resources diminished, opportunities squandered, and. . .our collective humanity is being slowly stripped of its virtue” ([Noble, 2015](#), p. 43). We contend that as billions of people are added to the global population ([Kochhar, 2014](#)) these challenges will escalate and become even more intense as resources and opportunities become scarcer. All of this, and more, bolsters the need to expand civic education in our schools as it is “integral to maintaining a functioning democratic republic” ([Atwell, Stillerman, & Brisgeland, 2021](#), p. 26). The expansion of civic education is monumentally important given there is “widespread acknowledgement that [civility] is eroding at the nation’s colleges and universities” ([Gilroy, 2008](#), p. 36).

Distrust

As [Brady and Kent \(2022\)](#) explain, everyday life in America depends upon peoples’ confidence in institutions—for example, people collectively trust the military and police to protect them; businesses to deliver safe products at reasonable prices; schools to instruct children; media to transmit accurate, truthful, and useful information; physicians and attorneys to treat, cure or protect people; and government to act in the nation’s best interest (p. 43). Yet, over the course of the last 50 years, Americans’ confidence in institutions has been declining ([Brady & Kent, 2022](#)), and “these declines have been significant” (p. 47). Americans’ trust (described as the “elixir for public life and neighborly relations”) of one another has also been declining ([Rainie, Keeter, & Perrin, 2019](#), para. 1) making it exponentially more difficult to solve key problems.

Viewed by some as a “cultural sickness” and a sign of a nation in decline, the majority of Americans think their distrust of one another and the federal government is a problem that gets in the way of resolving issues ([Rainie et al., 2019](#)). There are, however, some notable demographic variations in the Pew Research Center (PRC) study when it comes to Americans’ trust/distrust:

The share of [W]hites who show high levels of trust (27%) is twice as high as the share of [B]lacks (13%) and Hispanics (12%). The older a person is, the more likely they are to tilt toward more trustful answers. The more education Americans have, and the greater their household income, the greater the likelihood they are high on the personal trust spectrum. Those with less income and education are markedly more likely to be low trusters. . .personal trust turns out to be like many other personal attributes and goods that are arrayed unequally in society. . . ([Rainie et al., 2019](#), para. 8–9)

Historical racism

[Pildes \(2011\)](#) suggests that individuals are not the cause of polarization, rather, the current hyperpolarization is likely due to its rooting in historical or structural issues. The broader notion of America has never really included all of its people and the ignorance of the nation’s shared history has sustained parallel universes ([Marable, 2006](#)). These “historical structures have perpetuated prejudice and discrimination against those who are not able, White, straight, affluent, cis-gender Christian men” ([Servaes et al., 2022](#), p. 1708). Additionally, members of non-dominant groups will likely face significant and continued disadvantages throughout the course of their lives. Furthermore, what may be regarded as effective leadership in one society may not be so in another ([Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2012](#)). Contemporary structural issues that are exacerbating polarization include, among others, the

Voting Rights Act (VRA), primary elections, gerrymandering, internal legislative rules, and campaign finance.

Becoming an almost habitual practice in über conservative corners of the nation, minorities and other marginalized populations are being further disenfranchised by the policies and legislation of city councils, county commissions, and statehouses. This is precisely the opposite of what the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was drafted to accomplish. As President Lyndon Johnson (1965) reminded the nation in his inaugural address, “Justice requires us to remember that when any citizen denies his fellow, saying, ‘His color is not mine,’ or ‘His beliefs are strange and different,’ in that moment he betrays America. . .” (para. 9).

Social media

Due to the fractured nature of the country, Haidt (2022) compares America to the city of Babel. He quotes James Madison stating that our communities are prone to “the turbulence and weakness of unruly passions” (para. 22). Social media, he claims, has fueled these passions instead of slowing them down.

Additionally, social media gives a voice to those who might not have otherwise had one, but it also encourages injustice and political dysfunction in three ways. Provocateurs have power while most citizens stay quiet. Political extremists have power and a voice. Finally, everyone with digital technology can administer justice with no regard to the process of law.

In a 2021 report, the Pew Research Center (Mitchell, Jurkowitz, Baxter Oliphant, & Shearer, 2021) found that people who primarily relied on social media for political news tended to follow other news less closely than people who didn’t rely on social media for news. Additionally, and perhaps related to that fact, is that the social media reliant group was less likely to correctly answer questions on a range of topics from politics to current events. The primary takeaway from their study was that the public, as a whole, distrusts social media platforms as a source for political news. The “rise of social media has grown to a place where fake news, harmful voices, ideologies and messages can spread without oversight” (Simpson & Conner, 2020; in Williams, Gottlieb, & Lee, 2022, p. 8).

Though society distrusts social media there is also evidence to suggest individuals may be persuaded by its ability to share information quickly and easily. Fazio (2020) explored individuals’ beliefs in known falsehoods when moderated by repetition. The author found that “repeated falsehoods were rated as being more true than novel falsehoods, even when they both contradicted participants’ prior knowledge” (p. 4). The author did, however, find that the impact of repetition can be mitigated if individuals carefully consider the accuracy of the statement when first viewed.

Pedagogical approaches

To remedy some of these issues, Haidt (2022) argues that there are three categories of reform necessary: (1) harden democratic institutions; (2) reform social media (particularly the extremists on the platforms); and (3) prepare the next generation. Afterall, he states, “The most reliable cure for confirmation bias is interaction with people who don’t share your beliefs” (p. 60). Part of preparing the next generation to problem solve and to lead involves observation, participation, and reflection. These practices will aid students in understanding the personal, societal, and academic significance of their experiences (Trudeau & Kruse, 2014).

Fink (2003, in Trudeau & Kruse, 2014) proffers that while learning entails change, significant learning will culminate in lasting change when the following are deployed:

- (1) Foundational knowledge: understanding and remembering information and ideas;
- (2) Application: engaging in intellectual, physical, or social action and learning skills necessary to engage in such action;

- (3) Integration: seeing and understanding connections between ideas or people;
- (4) Human dimension: enhancing one's understanding of self and others;
- (5) Caring: developing new or deepening existing feelings, interests, or values;
- (6) Learning how to learn: improving one's ability to learn independently or participate in particular modes of inquiry. (pp. 15–16)

These six elements create the scaffolding for significant learning that advances foundational knowledge to more complex meaning and embraces a *brave space ideology* as opposed to a *safe space ideology*. Brave space ideology recognizes that a willingness to be uncomfortable is a prerequisite for growth (Arao & Xlwmwana, 2013). Engaging in controversial content that challenge students' worldviews is uncomfortable but, as leadership educators, we can help students lean into their discomfort and learn how to navigate controversy with civility – which is not inherently unsafe but, it is a skill that must be taught.

Description of application

“Things like religion, race, politics, gender, and sexuality are considered taboo topics and are not for polite discussion. But we do talk about them, a lot. We just rarely do so with people who we feel disagree with us” (Horton, Corbitt, & White, 2021, para. 1). One way to address fear of others, polarization, and their deleterious effects is to create easily implementable mitigation strategies (Yu *et al.*, 2021, p. 1268). At one Midwestern state comprehensive university, a three-part assignment was created for an upper-division undergraduate and graduate level civic leadership course to address the very issues of polarization, conflicting moral convictions, incivility, distrust, and historical racism, along with misinformation and disinformation (two distinct concepts). *Misinformation*, according to the American Psychological Association (2023), is false or inaccurate information whereas *disinformation* is the intentional presentation of false information which is deliberately intended to mislead.

This particular course is designed to provide students with a deeper understanding of the major components and principles of civic leadership and is built around Ehrlich's (2000) definition of civic engagement. That is to make a difference in the civic life of communities by developing a combination of knowledge, skills, values, and the motivation to make that difference and promoting the quality of life in communities through both political and non-political processes. Classroom activities examine the leadership process within the context of community and society and students are tasked with developing strategies to effect positive social change.

The learning outcomes for this class are that students will be able to: (1) compare and contrast civic and community leadership principles and organizational leadership principles; (2) demonstrate an understanding of the systems and stakeholders involved in creating community-level change; (3) examine the role of followers in civic and community leadership; (4) critically analyze and evaluate social movements; (5) assess the needs of a community and identify areas for improvement; and, (6) apply social change strategies and tactics to create sustainable change.

Part one

During the first week of each semester students complete a position survey. Each topic is selected with intention and only those considered to be *hot button* or controversial issues are included. Some topics carry over from semester to semester (e.g. abortion, capital punishment, gun violence, voter suppression, and immigration), while other topics may be

informed by current events locally, statewide, regionally, nationally, or globally (e.g. transgender athletes, book bans, Critical Race Theory, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, vaccines, and COVID-19 mask mandates, etc.). Each question is designed to force students to take a concrete position on an issue (see Table 1).

Students are not informed as to why they are completing the survey beyond that the information will be used for a class project. The information about *why* is intentionally withheld to increase the chances that students will accurately report their positions given that self-reporting can be problematic (Brenner & DeLamater, 2016). Focusing on identity theory and measure, the authors reveal that insofar as individuals are comprised of a multiplicity of identities, their responses to questions can vary depending on the prominence of a particular identity. Further, Latkin, Edwards, Favey-Rothwell, and Tobin (2017) argue that *social desirability bias* can also impact how people respond to stimuli. They cite the work of Paulhus (1984) who suggests that the social desirability bias has two components: (1) impression management, which is the purposeful presentation of self to fit into a situation or please an audience (in this case the instructor and classmates); and, (2) self-deception (which may be unconscious) which centers on maintaining a positive self-concept. We acknowledge that knowing the data will be used for a class project could cause some students to lean into biases but we feel confident that students are generally very honest with their responses.

Part two

Part two of the assignment requires students to write an essay and develop an argument in support of a topic and position that is assigned to them by the instructor. Every student is assigned to address a particular topic *in opposition* to their stated position on the survey. Private emails are sent to each student informing them of the topic and position they are to advocate for in their essay along with instructions to not reveal their topic or position to their classmates. They are, however, informed that this is an exercise in critical thinking and developing a sound argument that is fact-based and data-driven.

When the instructions for the writing assignment are revealed, it is acknowledged that some students may find this to be a discomforting assignment to work on in that it directly challenges their previously held assumptions and/or values or belief systems. It is also shared

Description: There are NO right or wrong answers for this survey. The information is being gathered for a class activity that will be revealed in the coming weeks. Your instructor is the ONLY person who has access to this information and students' anonymity will be protected. It is important that you aware of this so that you can be comfortable and feel safe in submitting your responses. Questions on this survey may cause some students to feel uncomfortable but, there is a purpose to this exercise. Thank you in advance for your thoughtful responses
Instructions: Even if you are not registered to vote or are on the fence with some of these hot-button issues, you must make one selection per question and the selection you make should be the one that is most closely aligned with your values, ideals, and beliefs

Topic	Question	Response option 1	Response option 2
Abortion	Are you. . .	Pro Life	Pro Choice
Capital punishment	Are you. . .	For	Against
Gun violence	Additional legislation is necessary to curb gun violence in the United States	Agree	Disagree
Voter suppression	Voter suppression in the United States is real	Agree	Disagree

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 1.
Survey description,
instructions and
sample questions

that our contention is that to grow and evolve as individuals and as compassionate members of the larger community of humans, it becomes necessary at times to step outside of one's comfort zone to understand the interconnectedness and complexities of the world through other perspectives. To strengthen communities and the nation's democracy, it is imperative that people engage in meaningful exchanges about the problems that exist and work collaboratively toward finding solutions. Part of this process is a willingness to listen to and understand other points of view – even when those views challenge individual sensitivities.

The essays are to be a minimum of five pages in length and written according to APA guidelines, double-spaced with one-inch margins using 12-pt Times New Roman or other easy to read font. Students are instructed that the paper should include but is not limited to: (1) an introduction to the topic; (2) a quasi-brief discussion of the divergent views on the topic; (3) a presentation of the argument for the position they have been assigned to; (4) a brief section about any active social movements related to the topic and/or a discussion about coalitions that currently exist (or need to be developed) to support the position they are advocating for; and, (5) concluding comments about why this particular position is the best one for American society.

Students must cite at least ten sources in their papers. Half of the sources must be academic/scholarly sources (i.e. peer-reviewed journal articles or textbooks). Other sources students may use are legitimate news outlets and wire services that do straight reportage. They can utilize data and reports from research organizations (e.g. Gallup or the Pew Research Center). They can use newspapers. They can use think tank white papers. They can also use content from organizational websites tied to the issue. Additionally, they may use articles in the popular press, *The Atlantic*, *Time*, etc. What they may not use is Wikipedia (due to the near constant editing from bots as well as registered and non-registered users), opinion blogs, or content from radio or television entertainment programs that are agenda-driven and opinion-based that target specific demographics (for example, much of the programming on Fox News or MSNBC cable channels). In other words, students are to search for *objective* as opposed to *subjective* material to create their arguments.

To assist with the writing involved in part two of the assignment, we worked with a university librarian to develop a special library guide specific to this assignment. There are six distinct electronic tabs for the digital library guide that students can access – the first is a search tool that houses multiple databases. For example, there is a *Controversial Issues Database* that features opposing viewpoints and pro/con materials. Among other options, students also have access to CQ Researcher (founded in 1923 as Editorial Research Reports) which is noted for its award-winning, in-depth coverage on a multitude of topics.

There is a tab that houses a plethora of resources, worksheets, and information about how to evaluate scholarly material. Similarly, there is a tab for evaluating popular sources according to the 5 Ws (who, what, when, where, and why) and the CRAAP model (currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose). Additionally, there is a guide entitled, *How to Spot Fake News*. There is a *Cite* tab with access to APA formatting resources and a section on bias-free language. Wrapping up the guide are featured library, research, and writing tutorials along with a *Help* tab so students can live chat with a librarian if need be.

Part three

The third and final portion of this assignment centers on peer critiques and assessing the credibility of resources. For this part of the assignment, the papers are anonymized, grouped together by topic, and then posted to the Discussion Board in both the online and on-campus versions of the class. Students must then choose two papers from any topics of interest to critique. Students are advised to select topics which have fewer than two current critiques to ensure a variety of topics are reviewed and prevents a single topic from garnering most of the

attention. In their written critiques, which are shared with the authors of each essay, students are to:

- (1) Identify the strong points of the argument.
- (2) Determine what was missing that would have strengthened the argument.
- (3) Share whether the paper was well written and easy to follow. If it wasn't, students are to offer specific recommendations for improvements.
- (4) Offer information about what they learned from reading the paper and whether or not a new perspective about the topic was developed or if the paper simply affirmed what they already believed.
- (5) Address the quality and credibility of the resources used for each of the papers they critique based on materials provided in the Library Guide.

While the authors know who submitted critiques of their work, students do not know whose work they are critiquing.

Discussion of outcomes and implications of application

As [Kegan \(1982\)](#) declared, "All growth is costly. It involves the leaving behind of an old way of being in the world" (p. 215). It is our hope that through this assignment wherein students have to directly confront and engage with diversity of thought and opinion, that they can ascend to different spaces of complexity in terms of their adult mental development ([Kegan & Lahey, 2016](#)) and ultimately, build trust while becoming more comfortable advocating for important causes, owning their positions, and developing empathy for other perspectives ([Forestiere, 2015](#)).

This particular assignment was created in the spring of 2021 while the COVID-19 shutdown was still in full swing and has been included in every iteration of the class in both on-campus and asynchronous online sections since then (fall 2021; spring and fall 2022; and spring and fall 2023). Feedback gathered from students (informally via conversation and emails and formally through standardized course evaluations) about this particular assignment has been overwhelmingly positive. They have shared that conducting research and creating an argument in support of a position that is contrary to what they actually believe was exceedingly difficult and, at times, extremely uncomfortable. Many students readily admitted they would never have explored some of these issues from the opposite perspective had they not been forced to as the result of a course requirement. Nonetheless, the vast majority of students also shared that they think this was an exceptional learning experience because it did, indeed, push them beyond their zone of comfort. There has not been a single time that a student reported they changed their mind about their position on a topic after having researched it (which is fine given that isn't the point of the assignment) but most developed a significant appreciation for the other side's point of view on the topic and they feel far better prepared to engage in a civil dialog about the subject.

Preparing students to engage in productive dialog and equipping them to have crucial conversations is absolutely necessary. Crucial conversations are discussions between or among two or more people where the stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong ([Patterson, Grenny, McMillian, & Switzler, 2012](#)). Unfortunately, too many people back away from crucial conversations out of fear of making matters worse and, in doing so, people have "become masters at avoiding tough conversations" (p. 3). This simply will not do if we truly care about people, our communities, and democracy. After all, "...full civic literacies cannot be garnered only by studying books; democratic knowledge and capabilities also are honed through hands-on, face-to-face, active engagement in the midst

Transformative learning and leadership

Through a variety of experiences, people acquire a coherent body of knowledge (i.e. associations, concepts, values, feelings, and conditioned responses) which make up the frames of reference that define their lives and worldviews (Mezirow (1997). These frames, which encompass cognitive, conative, and emotional components, are the assumptions through which people seek to understand their experiences. Although people have strong tendencies to reject ideas that fail to meet or fit their preconceptions, when circumstances permit, “transformative learners can move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience” (p. 5).

Transformative learning can, in turn, lead to transformative leadership. Per McKee and Bruce (2020), “transformative leadership requires that individuals reframe their world views and their senses of self in order to rethink assumptions and develop new solutions and systems” (p. 49). “Transformative leaders must work toward the creation of socially just, inclusive, and equitable democratic society which both acknowledges and overcomes past disparities in order to create a mutually beneficial community” (Shields, 2020, p. 14).

Our three-part assignment is one that helps students with some of this reframing as they acknowledge the value of diversity of thought and how that impacts them professionally and personally. As leadership educators, we have a responsibility to continually innovate and redefine our pedagogical practices to ensure that students are polishing their critical thinking skills. Critical thought is a mode of thinking about any subject, topic, or problem where thinkers and learners improve the quality of their thought processes by skillfully analyzing, assessing, and reconstructing the content. Critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, and self-monitored. In other words, it is self-corrective thinking. “It entails effective communication and problem-solving abilities, as well as a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and sociocentrism” (Foundation for Critical Thinking, n.d., para. 2).

These finely tuned critical thinking skills must be ever evolving to meet the complexities of an interconnected global environment as we prepare students for careers, or career advancement. Honing these skills is part of expanding mental complexities and, as one’s mental complexity increases, so does their repertoire of effective actions (Smerek, 2017) to adapt and navigate the world around them.

Recommendations

People expect diversity in a pluralistic society. Unfortunately, diversity, a mix of differences, is increasingly coming under attack in the U.S. by those who fear *otherness*. Confederate flag supporters, for example, are less likely to believe in anti-Black police bias or racial profiling (Updegrove, Cooper, & Dmello, 2021) and Chinese American students experienced higher levels of perceived discrimination and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic (Haft & Zhou, 2021). But fear of otherness is not new according to Lee (2021):

Across the centuries, we have labeled immigrants a threat because they were poor, practiced a different faith, were non-White. We have argued that there were too many of them, that they were not assimilating, that they were taking jobs away from deserving Americans, that they were bringing crime and disease into the country, and that they had dangerous political ideals, were un-American, or even hated America. Even as we have realized that the alleged threats posed by immigrants were, in hindsight, unjustified, we have allowed xenophobia to become an American tradition. (p. 819)

In 1750, “Benjamin Franklin worried that ‘swarthy’ foreigners speaking their own language among themselves, would swamp the colonies and their British subjects” (McNeil, 2020, para.

2). Indeed, race, as a sociopolitical construct, as opposed to a biological construct, is one created and reinforced by social and institutional norms and practices as well as individual attitudes and practices (Adams *et al.*, 2010). Race, “like other constructed social identities...emerged in the United States to justify the dominance of people defined as ‘White’ (colonists/settlers) held over other peoples defined as ‘non-White’ (first Native Americans, and enslaved Africans and later Mexicans, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, and South Asians)” (p. 60) and others defined as non-White. Motivated by economic interests and entrenched through laws and public policy, the process of racialization is continually being reinvented to perpetuate economic, political, and social advantages for some people and not for others (Adams *et al.*, 2010).

The contemporary leaders in the U.S. tend to mirror the nation’s dominant population and the “power elite” (i.e. those who own and manage the banks and corporations, finance political campaigns, and serve in government as elected officials or appointed military leaders, etc.) and has remained quite homogeneous and is dominated by White, masculine norms (Chin & Trimble, 2015). As leadership educators, we must continually remind our students that “democracy cannot thrive as a mere spectator system” (Rios Millett McCartney, 2013, p. 14) and that diverse voices are necessary to ensure it is functioning at the highest levels. We must also imbue to our students that they fully embrace active learning where they genuinely and meaningfully contribute to and participate in this style of learning to help construct their own understandings.

Recognizing the importance of finding middle ground among the many voices that comprise the nation, has led us to incorporate an additional element to this assignment moving forward. Specifically, future iterations of the assignment will require students to include an addendum (one page minimum) to their paper in which they will identify areas of potential common ground among the disparate opinions surrounding the issue and put forth strategies to achieve reasonable outcomes as a result of focusing on common ground.

Conclusion

In his timeless classic, Carnegie (1936/2022) reacted to the Buddha’s sentiment that “hatred is never ended by hatred but by love” with his own nugget of inspiration that is apropos to our point, “. . . a misunderstanding is never ended by an argument but by tact, diplomacy, conciliation and a sympathetic desire to see the other person’s viewpoint” (p. 126).

This assignment is, for many students, the first time they have been formally challenged with viewing the world through a lens other than their own. Though important, observation or awareness of diversity is not the end goal of this assignment. There must be action following the observation and awareness. In her book, *Good Power*, former IBM chairperson and chief executive officer Rometty (2023), acknowledged the difference in diversity and inclusion stating, “. . . diversity is a fact, but inclusion is a choice” (p. 238). Polarization, conflicting moral convictions, incivility, distrust, and historical racism fueled by social media, make the choice of inclusion difficult for many in U.S. society. It is our hope that exposure to a new point of view becomes a catalyst for further inquiry or changes in the minds of students who take this class. We believe that through assignments such as ours, people can begin breaking down the barriers that prevent the choice of inclusion and give a chance to all – regardless of backgrounds, appearances, or beliefs.

The American polity, in particular, “has abandoned civility and has increasingly resorted to anger, vitriol and violence rather than dialog to share their problems and express differences” (Williams *et al.*, 2022, p. 7) and this is a dangerous and very slippery slope for the nation. We must continually remind our students of the good that exists between and among diverse perspectives and people and the healthy ways in which we can resolve conflict and address concerns.

We need to encourage students to not shy away from challenging processes but also remind them of the benefits of developing a full complement of effective leadership practices that include: (1) modeling the way; (2) inspiring a shared vision; (3) challenging processes; (4) enabling others to act; and, (5) encouraging the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Similarly, we need to reinforce to our students that leadership is “concerned with effective change on behalf of others and society” and that it is “a process”, it is “collaborative”, it is “value-based” (Heri, 1994, p. 10) and that each of them has the potential to be change makers. The interconnectedness of society and the importance of the Social Change Model of Leadership and how each element of the “7 Cs” (collaboration, consciousness of self, commitment, congruence, common purpose, controversy with civility, and citizenship) are interactive and reciprocal in nature and must be continually reinforced.

In summation, the assignment described in this application brief expands students’ horizons and appropriately supports their development in accordance with specific elements of Kouzes and Posner’s (2017) practices of effective leadership and the Social Change Model of Leadership (Heri, 1994). Through this experience they learn to more effectively and efficiently interact with others toward common purposes – to honor and protect our collective humanity and the preserve the nation’s democracy through thoughtful and informed dialog.

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