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GUEST EDITORIAL

# Teaching in a Time of Discord: Six Strategies for Learning Design and Practice

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The rhetoric of the 2016 presidential election campaign was brutalizing. Teachers at all levels have reported negative effects, students made fearful by racist, xenophobic, antigay speech at one end of the spectrum and, at the other end, students emboldened to be oppressors, freely hurling hate speech and menacing those who were targeted. The campaign was an assault on civil discourse, which has been both an American cultural value and a mainstay of our democratic way of life. Recovery from this assault, like healing from a physical assault, will take time. What can learning designers and practitioners do to foster recovery and strengthen our collective civic sensibilities now and for the future?

The American Founders spoke eloquently of the vital role of education in the maintenance of our democratic systems of governance and way of life. Public education—the free and equal education of all the people—took shape soon after the nation's founding. The Common School movement of the 1830s, arguably a starting point, led over the course of a century and a half to our modern public schools, which strive to provide the best possible education to the vast diversity of our population, education that is freely available, fair, and comprehensive. Horace Mann, the "Father of the Common School," called such education "the great equalizer" (Cremin 1957, p. 65).

For more than 30 years, since the mid-1980s, we have witnessed an assault on public education in the form of a series of rolling "reforms," each falling short, each further eroding our public schools' ability to address the learning needs of students who will emerge from their classrooms into a vastly different world than their parents and grandparents have known. Since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, an over-emphasis on standardized testing has meant less "equalizing" in favor of more "sorting and selecting" and further narrowed the curriculum, shunting to the sidelines subjects such as music, art, history, and, perhaps most to our collective detriment, civic education. At the same time, it would be a mistake to regard civic education merely as a subject. All public education is—or should be—civic education: education not solely about governmental history, forms, functions, and procedures but, more importantly, education in the characteristics of civil discourse that foster and maintain our democracy.

The brutalizing discourse—perhaps absence of true discourse would be more accurate—of the presidential campaign (and some others down ballot) illustrates the culmination of a trend toward greater political polarization over time. This means that fewer political adversaries are willing to engage in civil discourse for the common good. A Pew study (Doherty 2014) of political polarization from 1994 to 2014 found polarization, the holding of rigid ideological positions, dramatically increasing. "'Ideological silos' are now common on the right and, to a lesser extent, the left," according to the report. Perhaps the clearest evidence of these silos can be seen in the relative absence of collaboration and compromise in the U.S. Congress over the course of the Obama presidency.

John Locke, the 17th-century Enlightenment philosopher much admired by many of the American Founders, defined civil discourse: "By their civil use, I mean such a communication of thoughts and ideas by words, as may serve for the upholding common conversation and commerce, about the ordinary affairs and conveniences of civil life, in the societies of men, one amongst another"

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(Walmsley 1995). Civil discourse benefits the common good, and it is this characteristic that, in a time of discord, should be part of the fabric of learning design and practice.

Following are six strategies that learning designers and practitioners may want to consider in order to foster habits of mind that are reflected in the understanding and use of civil discourse, regardless of subject matter or grade level. These strategies can be adapted for younger or older, including adult, learners, and frequently can be enhanced using Digital Age media.

## Foster Cooperation, Collaboration, and Compromise

With the youngest learners, there usually is an emphasis in the classroom on sharing and cooperating with one another, but that sometimes receives less attention as youngsters mature. The urge toward independence is natural, and expecting students to do independent work is a valid part of learning. However, a key factor of our 21st-century interconnected world is that success, whether in learning or in work, often depends on students' ability to cooperate, collaborate, and compromise in order to reach a common goal. In a time of political polarization, one antidote to discord is a habit of mind that puts the common good before ego and ideology, and where better to cultivate this habit of mind than in the classroom.

A 21st-century adaptation of traditional cooperative learning is computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL), which offers additional opportunities to promote positive interdependence as groups use technology to facilitate cooperation, collaboration, and compromise. In a review of CSCL, researchers Resta and Laferrière (2007) note,

> Research has linked collaborative tasks to student engagement in knowledge construction. Moreover, instructors who use CSCL can monitor student understanding and achievement in collaborative learning activities. In addition, students can review what they wrote or what their peers wrote, and instructors can analyze the discourse of team members using semi-automatic data analysis procedures for facilitation, moderation, or grading purposes. (p. 70)

Emphasizing problem- and project-based learning can help to bring students together in order to learn through active engagement the processes that make cooperation, collaboration, and compromise powerful vehicles for civil discourse.

## Teach the Power of Diversity

The term *diversity* works on many levels: cultural, racial, etc. Diversity also refers to differences in beliefs and understandings. The United States, from its founding, has been a nation marked out by diversity. We are a nation of immigrants. Our population historically has come from many different backgrounds, and despite xenophobic rhetoric, that diversity has long been a strength of our democracy.

Ancient humans around 2500 BCE found that smelting together copper and tin produced bronze, which was stronger than either of its components alone. Later, combining pig iron and carbon produced steel, indispensible in modern construction and manufacturing. The alloy that is American democracy is inherently stronger for the inclusion of diverse individuals and viewpoints. Pedagogical theorist Marri (2003) points out,

> Diversity enables liberty by preventing tyranny of the majority. Factions, as James Madison called them in *The Federalist No. 10*, are groups of citizens "united and actuated by some common impulse of passion or of interest" that is adverse to the rights of other citizens or the common good…. Second, diversity challenges the status quo. Diversity among groups helped to create and maintain public spaces of lively debate, boycotts, protests, and discussions that contested an entrenched status quo. (p. 259)

Helping students with diverse views and from diverse backgrounds learn how to engage in civil discourse and to cultivate a value for such engagement is crucial to forging a future less mired in the discord of recent years.

## Develop Empathy

Empathy, or the ability to put oneself in another's shoes, intuitively seems like a valuable characteristic to foster in students of all ages. But it's more than that, as researchers in many fields—for example, medicine (see Shapiro 2002) and business (Aggarwal et al. 2005)—have discovered. Journalist Maria Shriver pointed up the importance of developing empathy especially in this time of discord: "During this volatile political season I think a conversation about empathy is a good one for all of us to have—in our homes, in our workplaces and, most importantly, with ourselves" (Shriver 2016).

In schools, educators have found that developing empathy among students helps to build a positive classroom culture, strengthens community, and prepares students to be leaders in their community (Owen 2015). These results are particularly important in school communities composed of students from

diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and empathy will continue to be important for harmony and productivity as students move from school to futures in higher education and employment.

Interestingly, with the current emphasis on testing, fostering empathy can improve students' test scores. For example, Changing Worlds (changingworlds.org) is a Chicago-based nonprofit that provides in-school and after-school programs that foster empathy through oral history, writing, and the arts. Mark Rodrigues, then executive director of Changing Worlds, reported, "At the end of the third year of the program, test scores for students in Changing Worlds' program were greater than control group students, with an average positive difference of 11.5 points across all schools for composite scores" (Townsend 2012).

Teaching empathy skills in concert with subject matter can have a positive effect on the classroom community, an effect that can be carried over into civil discourse in adult life.

## Emphasize Integrated Knowledge

Connecting the unknown to the known is a powerful learning strategy. Connecting information across traditional disciplines broadens students' knowledge base, fosters deeper understanding, and encourages the consideration of complex intersections of ideas. Overwhelming curricular emphasis on reading and mathematics, which has been encouraged by overemphasis of standardized testing in these areas, has limited in many cases the amount of instructional time devoted to other subjects, such as art, music, and history. Emphasizing integrated knowledge offers a strategy that not only can deepen core subject understanding but also broaden students' knowledge to include other, often neglected disciplines.

For example, long before Sudoku became a mathematical craze people were exploring another type of square with numbers. A magic square is a grid with equal rows and columns in which distinct numbers add to the same sum for each row, column, and main diagonal. Magic squares date back to 2200 BCE in China. Albrecht Dürer, the German Renaissance artist is believed to have created the first European magic square, which he incorporated in his famous engraving, *Melancholia*. His 16-cell magic square also includes in the two center cells of the bottom row 15 and 14, or 1514, the year he created the engraving. Interestingly, Dürer also wrote treatises on mathematics (Walling 2005).

With Internet browsing and search features, such connections are mere mouse-clicks away. In a sense, integrating knowledge in this manner is akin to a "six degrees of separation" game to see what connections can be found among a variety of disciplines.

By integrating knowledge in this way, a mathematics lesson also meaningfully incorporates aspects of art and history, not only adding interest but also expanding students' knowledge of, and potentially their ability to make, connections that deepen complex understandings.

## Teach Critical Discernment

*Discernment* means simply the ability to judge well. Information in the Digital Age has expanded exponentially since the advent of the computer and the Internet. So has misinformation. During the recent political campaign, *fact-checking* became a daily byword. Often the value of truth seemed to fall by the wayside. Miller (2010), writing for Youth Media Reporter, asks:

> How do we know what information is trustworthy? How do we distinguish credible information from raw information, misinformation, and propaganda?… Because the focus on standardized testing in schools has tended to push civics or current events courses out of classrooms, schools today frequently do not address these questions. A consensus is developing both across the United States and in Europe that national efforts are needed to create a savvy, digital-age citizenry that is informed and engaged. The nascent news literacy movement has begun to meet this challenge.

This conclusion is supported by results from *ACT National Curriculum Survey*® 2016, in which K-12 and college educators agreed that "distinguishing between fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment" was among the top five prerequisite skills for college success. However, when college educators were asked to evaluate the preparation of their entering students, only 18% rated this skill in the top half of the scale (ACT 2016, p. 9).

News literacy, often more broadly media literacy, expands on basic concepts that traditionally have been taught as students begin to do research. Is found information reliable? In our Digital Age, there's a lot more information to find, making the challenge of discerning its reliability all the more challenging. For a thorough treatment of this topic the Knight Commission's report, *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*, is a valuable resource (Knight Commission 2009).

Critical discernment is a vital skill for the formation and sustenance of civil discourse. Incorporating such skill development pervasively across subjects and levels is essential.

## Encourage Self-Evaluation

Self-evaluation develops another aspect of critical discernment. It can be thought of as comprising four phases: 1)

self-identification of learning goals and criteria, in which the learner identifies what he or she wants, needs, and intends to learn and the criteria that will identify whether the learning goals have been achieved; 2) self-monitoring during learning activities, when the learner attempts (and may initially be guided) to be actively aware of his or her own learning; 3) self-assessment at one or more points during the learning activities, when the learner stops to take stock, matching activities and achievement to goals and criteria to assess whether learning is successful and on track; and 4) self-reflection, for which the learner thinks about his or her progress, concluding that the goals have been met or that continued effort, perhaps through revised learning strategies, must be made.

Learner self-evaluation does not come without guidance in the process. Self-identification of goals and learning criteria, self-monitoring, self-assessment, and self-reflection are learned behaviors facilitated by learning designers and teachers. Andrade and Valtcheva (2009) suggest that one way to facilitate effective self-evaluation is through the use of criteria that align with the goals and contexts of learning. When students use criteria-referenced self-assessment, according to these researchers, "The effect can be both short-term, as when self-assessment influences student performance on a particular assignment, as well as long-term, as students become more self-regulated in their learning" (p. 17).

The ability to self-evaluate strengthens personal awareness and is key to participating meaningfully in civil discourse for the common good.

## Conclusion

On August 4, 1822, then former President James Madison wrote to W.T. Barry, who had been a U.S. senator during Madison's presidency and was at the time lieutenant governor of Kentucky:

> The liberal appropriations made by the Legislature of Kentucky for a general system of Education cannot be too much applauded. A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives. (Kurland and Lerner 1987)

Madison was among the American Founders, like Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, John Adams, and others, who believed fervently that education was essential to the maintenance of our democracy. They knew that without an educated populace democracy would be imperiled.

Today, in this time of discord following a brutalizing presidential campaign, the future of American democracy is sitting in our classrooms. Students at every level in every part of this nation need and deserve to be immersed in learning that fosters civil discourse as fundamental to the most effective working of our democratic system of governance. In a very real sense, public education must be civic education.

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