NOTES

1. Students self-selected into online courses but had no advance notice of the course design.
2. Six dimensions of CT are scored: Issue Identification, Textual Interpretation, Logical Consistency, Awareness of Alternative Perspectives, Use of Evidence, and Assessing Implications. Scores are weighted equally to form an additive index.
3. To improve comparability, all exam scores were normalized as a percentage of the top score. Scores for writing proficiency are averages of scores for Spelling and Grammar, Introduction, Organization, and Efficiency. Exams varied in their content and format, but criteria for assessing writing were stable for the entire period.

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A FORMAT-FLEXIBLE PEDAGOGY OF CIVIL DISCOURSE

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DOI:10.1017/S1049096520001547

College can be a formative time for exploring our political beliefs. As teachers, political scientists should be keenly interested in fostering this development through political discussion in the confines of the classroom while remaining aware of the pitfalls that accompany this engagement outside of it—particularly because much of this discussion takes place online. Accordingly, facilitating conversation in an online format is crucial to developing skills that translate to the larger political environment. Drawing on my experience in teaching synchronous class discussions on Twitter, this article explores best practices for using online discussions to model civil, substantive discourse and considerations for training students to be responsible in their independent political communications.

Although the current contentious political environment might suggest otherwise, engaging our fellow citizens in meaningful dialogue about politics is crucial to the health of democracy. Research shows that discussing politics helps us to refine our own views and makes us more empathetic toward the views of others (Harrison 2020). Despite how uncomfortable differences of opinion might make us feel, we know that "crosscutting" conversations have many positive outcomes (Mutz 2006).

Alas, many of us—our students included—are avoiding the rancor that seems ubiquitous in political discussion by avoiding it. The conditions seem most harsh in online spaces where opportunity is plentiful but social accountability is less so. As Harrison (2020, 10) observes, "Societal, cultural, and technological changes are making it increasingly convenient to avoid contention and disagreement altogether, leaving us without opportunities to learn how to handle respectful disagreement of opinion."

These realities make it imperative for college instructors to provide opportunities for students to engage in civic discourse. This period of socialization in young adults' lives is vital given that their attitudes are not totally fixed and remain malleable through early adulthood (Sears and Levy 2003). This means that when students come to us, they very well may have some idea of their political values but are still open to refining them based on the new people and ideas that they will be exposed to in college. Political discussion is crucial to this development.

It is naïve to imagine that the skills that lead to the quality exchange of ideas develop without purposeful training; therefore, our classrooms should be training grounds. Any instructor who has successfully navigated a discussion-based (i.e., in-person or online format) course recognizes these building blocks for preparing students to be good discussants. This preparation ideally should consist of the building of community, training in information literacy, and socialization of "good" behavior.

In my own pedagogy, this means building toward students discussing political issues synchronously during a "Class on Twitter" (Sweet-Cushman 2019), a pedagogical innovation to combine the benefits of classroom discussion with the reality of real-world conversation. Students are given an issue of politics or policy and are expected to practice their information literacy and discussion skills to share information with one another quickly and succinctly on Twitter. I wait until students have had an opportunity to get to know one another; online, this is through small-group work or breakout sessions—meaningful political discourse does not occur between strangers in the comments section but rather between individuals with at least some level of familiarity and trust (Himelboim et al. 2012; Stolle, Soroka, and Johnston 2008). It is our responsibility to develop that trust. I also pose most of the questions, setting up the resulting discourse to be constructive and focused.

Students must be prepared with the requisite information literacy to support substantive contributions. Two primary considerations are guiding students' understanding of (1) the difference between opinion and fact,[1] and (2) how to judge the quality of information—including assessing what makes a good source. Students reported that they find this second consideration challenging (Sweet-Cushman 2019), but I have had luck with the Media Bias Chart® constructed by Ad Fontes Media.

We also should socialize students in productive discussion dynamics. Faculty should model good behavior in this regard, providing a safe space to disagree, ask questions, and seek clarification. For me, this can take the form of "manufacturing" disagreement when it does not exist naturally among students.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520001547 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Transitioning to actual political discussions, generating realism can be important to students who recognize that they have these opportunities for discourse in their everyday life. Certainly, these practices can be implemented in face-to-face classroom discussions or in online discussion boards through a course's learning-management system. Social media provides extra realism (Sweet-Cushman 2019), especially in that it allows for students to grapple with the possibility of interjections from unfamiliar discussants as they interact with their peers—much like how an organic online political discussion might unfold.

> *...I briefly focus on only four broader elements of fostering healthy discussion: deemphasizing competition, focusing on educating rather than changing minds, appealing to commonalities, and knowing when* not *to contribute.*

For the discussion host, there are several small components that make the conversation more substantive, such as providing a list of phrases that help students embrace their vulnerability (e.g., "Oh, I didn't know that; I'll have to think on it a bit" or "This is a thing I believe, but I am not sure I can support it"). However, I briefly focus on only four broader elements of fostering healthy discussion: deemphasizing competition, focusing on educating rather than changing minds, appealing to commonalities, and knowing when *not* to contribute.

Academia has taught political discourse as competitive argumentation. From my own undergraduate experience, I vividly remember "beating" other students in my argumentation course using traditional rules of debate. The object was not to convince anyone of anything but rather to construct a better argument. Whereas structured debate of this type is valuable, it is not a productive way to discuss issues in the real world; we should discourage competition. The objective of civil discourse should be to expose different ideas, not to make more cerebral arguments.

Relatedly, we should emphasize that the objective is to better understand issues, including perspectives that we do not share. This might require gently asking a student to reframe an accusation as a question. If a political discussion focuses on understanding rather than changing other points of view, we get closer to the achievable goals of increased empathy, political knowledge, and broadened perspective. It also means that we can feel good about what we accomplish in a discussion—regardless of what was said—because we learned something. Framing discussions as learning opportunities rather than attempts at changing another's mind sets up students for success.

One reason that changing minds is so difficult is that politics is increasingly projected as "us versus them," and our political identities have become super identities (Mason 2018)—meaning that when you critique someone's position on an issue, you are condemning the entire person. That is difficult to put aside in a discussion: it is too personal. The good news is that it is not difficult to cultivate a sense of group solidarity (Tajfel 2010); even tenuous group membership can aid in political cohesion (Huddy 2003). If students seek ways to emphasize how their co-discussants are more similar than not, it can keep the discussion from becoming divisive.

Finally, sometimes the best role to take in a discussion of any type is simply that of listener. I encourage students to know their limits. If they recognize that they are too passionate about an issue to contribute productively—what social psychologists call "ego involvement"—they can train themselves to simply read and learn as a spectator. Presence is still participation.

These suggestions are not necessarily specific to Twitter but rather any space where students might be expected to engage in political discourse with one another. Frequently, in their life as both a student and a citizen, those spaces are online. Furthermore, this is not an exhaustive approach to training students to be effective members of democratic society through an ability to participate in political discourse but rather a starting point. If during their undergraduate years students actively learn the tools required to be productive discussants and they have ample realistic opportunities to practice, we might reasonably expect that they will continue to do so in their own social circles and on social media. ■

NOTE

1. A Pew Research Center study (Gottfried and Greico 2018) found that people ages 18 to 49 were substantially better than those older than 50 at accurately identifying both fact and opinion news statements.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520001547 Published online by Cambridge University Press