Deliberative Dialogue Discussion: Faculty Overview

This section offers a template for incorporating a deliberative dialogue discussion in the curriculum. The faculty member should allow at least 15 minutes for the discussion section. This activity can be used independently and ideally in conjunction with topics on the syllabus.

The goal of this module is that students will explore the connection between discipline-specific content and its relation to policy, elected officials, and voting.

What is Deliberative Dialogue?

Scott London (Kettering Foundation), in his essay titled "Thinking Together: The Power of Deliberative Dialogue" defines deliberative dialogue as **"a form of discussion aimed at finding the best course of action."** He then goes on to elaborate:

> "Deliberative questions take the form 'What should we do?' **The purpose is not so much to solve a problem or resolve an issue as to explore the most promising avenues for action.** Deliberative dialogue differs from other forms of public discourse — such as debate, negotiation, brainstorming, consensus-building — because **the objective is not so much to talk together as to think together**, not so much to reach a conclusion as to discover where a conclusion might lie... In this spirit, deliberative dialogue among a group of people is aimed at establishing a framework for mutual understanding and a common purpose that transcends mere ideas and opinions. While it may not produce consensus, it can produce collective insight and judgment reflecting the thinking of the group as a whole — personal disagreements notwithstanding."

Why facilitate a deliberative dialogue discussion in class?

Preparing our students to solve the greatest problems of today and tomorrow is one of the cornerstones of higher education. This requires:

- Understanding problems including the historical, cultural, geopolitical, socioeconomic, and other circumstances surrounding them;
- Examining all of the possible solutions including the benefits and costs of each, and;
- Working together to determine the best course of action.

Why Deliberative Dialogue?

Deliberative dialogue discussion reinforces the important responsibility that we all have to meaningfully contribute to the betterment of society and to strengthen our democracy through civic and voter participation. It is an effective tool for creating change by focusing on problems and solutions instead of hyperpartisanship and the *us* versus *them* mentality. It does so while promoting civility, humanizing the way we talk about issues with one another, and centering the experiences of people and communities.

Deliberative dialogue also promotes the development and practice of necessary skills including critical thinking, active listening, public speaking, consensus-building, and finding common ground across differences.

A 2020 report from Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life offers 12 recommendations for faculty, chief academic officers, provosts, deans, and chairs to promote political learning and electoral participation. Three of the recommendations are centered around carving out classroom time for:

- Teaching students how to vote;
- Building and maintaining community and social cohesion within your classroom and department, and;
- Teaching the policy questions for each field.

Every discipline is rooted in public interests, and problems are almost always interdisciplinary, allowing for deliberative dialogue discussion to be a pedagogical approach in every classroom.

Choosing a Topic

The topic is the key component for bridging course content and a civic dialogue in class. The topic should translate into an issue which students can take a stance on. Methods for identifying a topic include:

- **Expanding on course content in the syllabus.**
  - Many courses discuss multifaceted topics that are influenced by policy. These topics can be adapted for deliberative dialogue discussion topics.
  - See this list of U.S. house committees or search for C-SPAN videos on recent topics.
- **Choosing a current issue/event.**
  - Pick a topic that is easily understood like a popular current event to ensure everyone can participate in the discussion. This can be a global, federal, state, community, or local campus issue/event.
- **For a list of topics suggested by faculty members.**
  - Check out our Deliberative Dialogue Discussion Topics suggested by faculty and staff in our network. You can search for related topics based on the discipline you're interested in. For each topic, we offer sample discussion prompts and issue stances to get you started, and supplemental resources for even deeper learning and engagement.

Students should take a stance on the issue during the discussion. Because the goal of the discussion is to "think together" as opposed to debating, it is important to keep the stances as clear, plausible, non-divisive, and non-partisan as possible. Phrasing issue stances for potentially triggering/controversial topics such as reproductive rights and gun control warrant special consideration, as the discussion could easily turn argumentative. Offer at least three stances, to encourage exploring multiple points of view. If only two opposite stances are offered, the discussion could easily turn into a "us vs. them" mentality.

Discussion Module

Time: 30-45 minutes

I. **Introduce (or expand on) how the topic/issue is influenced by policy.** (3 minutes)

For example, if the faculty member has just finished a unit on "The Future of Artificial Intelligence," this topic would easily transition into a discussion about Artificial Intelligence policies in the government, public research funding, and the relevant house committees.

II. Introduce "Ground Rules" or "Guidelines for Discussion." (5 minutes)

Emphasize that the goal of the discussion is to explore issues and stances together rather than reach a definitive conclusion. At the end of the dialogue, students should realize that regardless of their stance on the topic, their opinions have value, and should be shared.

III. Outline the issue and possible stances. (5 minutes)

Propose open ended prompts that encourage exploring various stances. Students can be prompted questions like "What are reasons to propose or avoid the sugar tax? Should elected officials be able to tax what citizens privately consume? Would a sugary drink tax be a net positive or negative?"

Then outline stances. In order to encourage explorative and civil discussion, avoid only providing two opposite stances. For example, instead of "for a sugary beverage tax vs. against a sugary beverage tax," a third stance could be, only implement the tax in certain situations/communities. If so, who would get to decide?"

IV. Discussion (at least 15 minutes)

Allow students to discuss the prompts and explore their stances on the issue in small groups (of 2 to 5 people). Reiterate that the goal of the discussion is to explore where the conclusion may lie, instead of the conclusion itself. Encourage each person to speak in the small group discussions.

While discussions are happening, the faculty member(s) should offer support such as redirecting off-track discussions or proposing different perspectives if everyone in a group agrees.

V. Debrief (3 minutes)

Briefly ask students if:

- Any parts of the discussion surprised or resonated with anyone?
- In what way do community members and elected officials have influence over this matter?
- What can you do to influence this issue?

This is an apt transition to the "Why Voting Matters" module or "How to Vote" module.

Guidelines for Facilitating Civil Discussions on Difficult or Controversial Topics

Created by the Widener University Political Engagement Committee (Adopted Fall 2017, Modified Fall 2020).

The following materials are organized to assist students in their training to become more effective facilitators of structured discussions on controversial issues.

Planned Discussions on Predetermined Controversial Topics

Planning a discussion on a controversial topic or issue benefits from consideration of the following topics:

- Identifying a clear purpose
- Establishing ground rules
- Providing a common base for understanding
- Creating a framework for the discussion that maintains focus and flow
- Including everyone
- Being an active facilitator
- Summarizing discussion and gathering feedback

Identifying a clear purpose

Starting a discussion with a clearly articulated objective can help shape the nature of the discussion and link it to other desired outcomes. We will want to pre-establish some important objectives of the facilitated discussion, but also include our discussion participants in affirming these purposes.

What is the purpose of promoting civil discussions on contentious topics?

Establishing ground rules or guidelines

Discussion facilitators will also want to establish a clear set of ground rules for framing the discussion session. We will want to pre-establish a set of ground rules, but also engage discussion participants in the process of identifying and acknowledging them. It is important that students agree on the ground rules before discussion begins. We prefer positive framing, rather than restrictive framing.

Some suggestions include: (select some and simplify)

- Listen respectfully, without interrupting.
- Listen actively and with an ear to understanding others' views.
- Challenge ideas, not individuals.
- Commit to learning rather than debating. Today is for information and opinion sharing, rather than direct persuasion. (There will be time for that later)
- Allow everyone the chance to speak.
- Avoid assumptions about any member of the class or generalizations about social groups. Do not ask individuals to speak for their (perceived) social group.

Providing a common basis for understanding

Our facilitated discussion model centers on initially constraining discussions to select topics or themes. Our model expects that discussion sessions will follow some session presenting information about the contentious topic for discussion.

You may choose to begin the discussion by exploring the scope of prior knowledge about the discussion topic and reactions to information presented in the prior session.

Create a framework for the discussion that maintains focus and flow

It is important to create a framework for the discussion in addition to having clearly defined objectives. Your framework can be a guide, balancing the need to have clear purpose and direction while being open to student observations and interpretation.

We recommend developing a pre-determined array of discussion prompts, while also allowing for flexibility to match the interests of participants and to adapt to unforeseen topics from the prior session.

- Begin the discussion with clear, open-ended but bounded questions that encourage discussion.
- Encourage participants to elaborate upon their comments where needed. Probing questions can prompt participants to share more specific information, clarify an idea, elaborate on a point, or provide further explanation.
- Be prepared to redirect the discussion if participants go beyond the intended focus.
- Recap the key discussion points or issues at the end of session

Including everyone

To include all students' perspectives can be challenging in a whole group discussion, especially if students are dealing with unfamiliar or controversial material.

Some methods for increasing the number of discussants include:

- **The Round**: Give each participant an opportunity to respond to a guiding question without interruption or comments. Provide students with the option to pass. After the round, discuss the responses.
- **Think-Pair-Share:** Give participants a few minutes to respond to a question individually in writing. Divide the class into pairs. Instruct the participants to share their responses with group members. After a specified time period, have the group reconvene in order to debrief. You can ask for comments on how much their pairs of views coincided or differed, or ask what questions remain after their paired discussion.

Being an active facilitator

In order to keep a discussion focused and purposeful, it is important to be an active facilitator rather than a passive observer. Be careful to maintain some control but not over-control. Your role as an active facilitator can include rewording questions posed by students, correcting misinformation, making reference to relevant content from the prior session, asking for clarification, and reviewing main points.

Students may expect their facilitators to express their own point of view, or they may ask explicitly for this view. In deciding how to respond, facilitators should consider their comfort in expressing personal views, and also the impact such expressions will have on this and future discussions.

Summarizing discussion and gathering feedback

It is very important to save time at the end of the session to summarize the main points of the discussion. Students are more likely to feel that a discussion was valuable if the facilitator, with the help of the other participants, synthesizes what has been shared or identifies the key issues explored.

You may also want to ask closing questions about their experience with facilitated discussion.

Adapted in part from the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) at the University of Michigan. Subsequent adaptations made upon review of the "Deliberative Dialogue" module from the Project Pericles and input from numerous faculty in the Social Science Division at Widener University.