

The Spaces We Make: Dialogic Classrooms and Social Transformation

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ABSTRACT

Recent research examining the use of Reflective Structured Dialogue in undergraduate classrooms shows that classes that are intentionally designed to invite reflection, curiosity, and connection across difference increase student engagement, comprehension of course content, and willingness to entertain ideas at variance with native worldviews. This paper outlines the principles of dialogic classrooms, including their basis in Reflective Structured Dialogue, an approach to conflict transformation. Moving to a Ph.D. core seminar as a case study, the paper then considers the ways in which conflict management principles—especially the intentional crafting of spaces to hold relationships in curiosity, openness, and vulnerability—can shape what is possible in human relationships. Students who are graduates of dialogic classrooms can shape spaces in professional and other social settings, inviting productive discourse that works against the flattening effects of polarization.

I. INTRODUCTION: SPACE AND POSSIBILITIES

Early in my teaching career, I was assigned a new classroom in which to conduct a standard course in our general education curriculum for undergraduates, now titled “Religious Literacy.” I had taught the class several times before and was not particularly daunted by its relocation to classrooms on the ground floor of my university’s freshly completed Residential Commons, undergraduate facilities designed to foster a sense of community, when we began requiring sophomores as well as first-year students to live on campus. Though I knew the classrooms had been hastily finished, with furnishings arriving just a few days before the start of term, I imagined a light, flexible space considerably more adept than the boxy classrooms—still sporting blackboards and their accompanying clouds of chalk dust—to which I had become accustomed in my home building, which enjoys a note on the National Historic Register.

When I walked in that first morning, however, I came to understand very quickly that “new” did not equate with “better.” The room was shaped like an L, so that it was almost impossible to have all 35 students looking either in one direction or at each other. A pillar in the middle of the room impeded any clear vision of a screen meant for the projection of technology, and the white board was mounted on a different wall than the screen, making it exceedingly awkward to use both in the same session. While this was disorienting enough, I quickly came to learn that the handful of students who arrived a few minutes late were locked out of the room, imprisoned in a foyer I could not see from my corner of the L. The moveable furniture I had coveted for years was too big for the space, making it impossible to actually use in any meaningful way. It was, as I reported to a colleague fated to teach in the same place later in the day, a classroom from hell.

It is standard knowledge among mediators that space matters. I have watched my partner in Reflective Structured Dialogue work, John Sarrouf, agonize over the symmetry of a circle of chairs, and I have listened as mediation experts emphasize the importance of holding one’s hands and body just so in order to elicit possibilities in the responses of their clients. This is knowledge of which the religious people I study are also aware. Cathedrals, temples, and mosques are designed to inspire awe and contemplation; adherents know what to do with their bodies and voices in places and times of reverence. As demonstrated by that poorly planned classroom, however, the academy often neglects spatial considerations when it comes to pedagogy, a lacuna that goes well beyond the physical.

This paper argues for the careful crafting of pedagogical spaces through processes of thoughtful reorientation that an emphasis on dialogic

practices can provide. The lessons learned from research on dialogic classrooms and a case study taken from a graduate core seminar, reoriented using dialogic principles, suggest that crafting pedagogical spaces using dialogic approaches positively shapes what is possible in human relationships—between students in a class, between students and course materials, and to future iterations of relationships in professional and social settings as students learn the skills and intention required to deliberately create spaces that hold and encourage productive vulnerabilities and connections across differences.

II. HOLDING SPACE: REFLECTIVE STRUCTURED DIALOGUE AND DIALOGIC CLASSROOMS

The genesis of these observations is work which begun in 2016 that tested Reflective Structured Dialogue as a pedagogical approach to connection across difference in postsecondary classrooms. Pioneered by a group of family therapists in Cambridge, MA in the wake of abortion clinic violence in the late 1980s, Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) is an approach to speaking and listening across differences employed by non-profit Essential Partners, Inc. (formerly Public Conversations Project). Drawing on lessons learned from dysfunctional family dynamics, RSD was designed by members of the Family Institute of Cambridge to disrupt stuck and reactive patterns of discourse that often manifest around polarizing issues. As several founders described it:

[RSD is] an approach to creating contexts in which opponents in long-standing conflicts over public issues can move beyond stereotyping, polarizing rhetoric and defensive reactivity, contexts where they can relate in ways that enable them to understand more fully the beliefs, meanings, values, and fears held not only by their opponents, but also by themselves.²

Core practices of RSD include giving participants time to reflect before speaking and listening, giving attention to the ways in which personal experiences and deeply held beliefs and values influence people's positions on

² Richard Chasin et al., *From Diatribe to Dialogue on Divisive Public Issues: Approaches Drawn from Family Therapy*, 13 *MEDIATION Q.* 323, 324 (1996); see generally, Carol Becker et al., *From Stuck Debate to New Conversation on Controversial Issues*, 7 *J. OF FEMINIST FAM. THERAPY* 143 (1995).

polarizing issues, a structured format that equalizes time to speak and listen amongst participants, an emphasis on speaking to be understood and listening to understand rather than one of persuasion, and a focus on curiosity as a positive value. All of these practices create a space in which people are encouraged to be reflective rather than reactive, a stance that breaks the stuck loops of discourse described above. Essential Partners has used RSD since 1989 to encourage deep listening and constructive speaking such that people can build trust and understanding across differences. The organization regularly works with faith communities around issues such as sexuality and science; civic organizations around issues of policing, space allocation, or other community concerns; and educational institutions around issues of expression, diversity, and community engagement. In 2018, Essential Partners mediated a national conversation about guns that brought 21 Americans to Washington D.C. to talk about their views on gun ownership and regulation.³

Classroom applications are more recent and are the result of an ongoing collaboration between John Sarrouf, Co-Executive Director and Director of Strategic Partnerships at Essential Partners, and a growing team of researchers and practitioners. In 2016, following a two-year sustained conversation about free expression issues on college campuses, Mr. Sarrouf and I developed and led a two-day workshop on the use of RSD in Religious Studies classrooms for the Graduate Program in Religious Studies at Southern Methodist University.⁴ In 2017, we began a major research project investigating the use of RSD in undergraduate classrooms to promote intellectual humility and conviction with faculty from five institutions in the diverse fields of sociology, philosophy, social work, and biological science focused on stem cell research.⁵

After several months of collaborative work aimed at defining intellectual humility and conviction, ways to measure those traits using quantitative and qualitative instruments, class observations designed to assess

³ Diane Tsai et al., *What Happens When You Reimagine the Difficult Conversation about Guns*, TIME (Apr. 4, 2018), <https://time.com/5226590/guns-conversation-america/>.

⁴ The workshop was titled, "Conflict and Conversation in Religious Studies Settings." The workshop was funded by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion in 2016.

⁵ The research referenced in this article was supported by a subaward agreement from the University of Connecticut with funds provided by Grant No. 58942 from the John Templeton Foundation. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of UCONN or the John Templeton Foundation. *See generally*, UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT, <https://humilityandconviction.uconn.edu/globalresearchprojects/> (last visited Apr. 6, 2020). This study was approved by the Southern Methodist University Institutional Review Board.

the ways faculty generally use discussion and positioning in classrooms, and some fine tuning of the established workshop model, the grant leadership team enrolled faculty in short one- to two-day workshops to teach skills in RSD as a classroom practice. Faculty graduates of those workshops who opted into the larger study and who employed at least three instances of dialogic techniques in their classrooms then administered an exit survey to students in their classes via a link to the Qualtrics survey the team had designed. The leadership team trained more than 130 faculty at thirteen institutions and received a total of 428 surveys over three semesters: Fall 2017, Spring 2018, and Fall 2018.

Students were sorted by class standing (first-year through graduate) and gender, though we did not code for race/ethnicity, socioeconomic background, or major. The survey was mixed method, including Likert scale questions (disagree to agree, none to significant, etc.), short explanatory sections, and longer, open-ended written sections (e.g., “Think of a dialogue that occurred in your classroom this semester. What was the topic? Tell a story about what went well and/or did not go well during the conversation”). After analyzing the results of the 2017 survey, we developed tiered questions to better understand potentially ambiguous initial responses⁶ and eliminated some questions that we came to view as not open-ended enough.

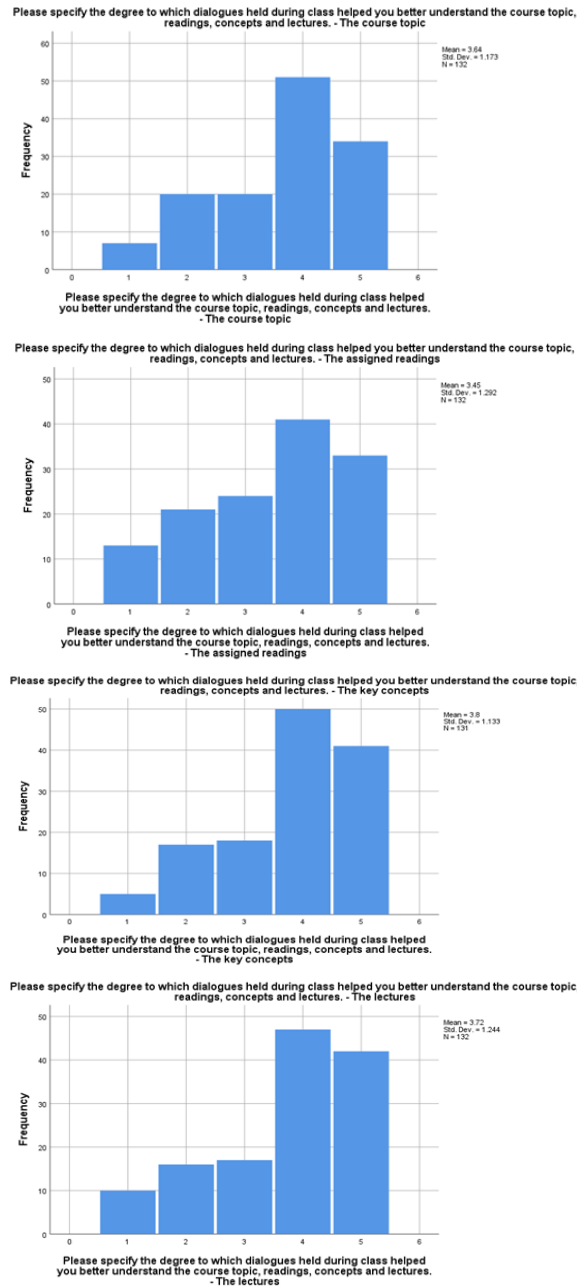
The results of the survey, combined with interviews of participating faculty members and observations of their teaching, show that the use of RSD and accompanying dialogic practices, a cluster of strategies and attitudes we have come to call a “Dialogic Classroom,” resulted in 1) a remarkably robust student engagement with faculty, peers, and course content; 2) a strong sense of belonging in class settings; 3) an increased willingness to speak in class; and 4) a marked willingness and ability to speak and listen across differences, even about contentious subjects.

For example, 99% of students surveyed in 2017 reported that they either somewhat agreed (35%) or agreed (64%) that “dialogues in this classroom helped me understand the course topic, readings, and concepts better.” When broken into categories of course topic, assignments, key concepts, and lectures in the 2018 Spring and Fall surveys for purposes of better understanding which parts of a class students felt dialogue supported, respondents emphasized that dialogue helped them thrive conceptually, and they also felt strongly that it aided them in understanding assignments, lectures, and course topics more broadly (Figure 1).

⁶ For example, did a student report being less likely to be willing to speak because they felt the dialogues shut them down, or because they were actively trying to listen to others?

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Figure 1 – Data from Spring 2018 study survey (n=132). 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = about half the time, 4 = most of the time, 5 = always



In a similar manner, students almost universally reported a strong sense of belonging in class, something they talked about in the written section of the survey as being related to getting to know classmates better, class experiences that invited listening, and environments that encouraged a sense of comfort and trust between peers. “As we had more dialogues the class became more open and willing to talk to each other rather than the professor,” wrote one student in 2017, answering the question, “In this course, have you seen changes or transformations in how others engage in your class? If YES, please describe.” Another commented: “Before, NO ONE wanted to talk. Over the semester, we had the quietest people join the discussion.” In the Spring 2018 survey, when asked to comment regarding if and why they were more willing to speak in class, one student responded: “We became comfortable with one another and I knew they would be understanding and interested in answering honestly.” Another student elaborated: “Having an open, respectful and friendly environment helped ensure that both me and my classmates understood that a question wasn’t an attack on their ideas or opinions, but an attempt to answer their stance more thoroughly or to point out a new perspective.” Others wrote about making friends in the class or feeling that the classroom environment was welcoming.

Quantitative data from the surveys also support dialogic classrooms as spaces that invite student belonging. When asked if “The opportunity to dialogue in this classroom helped me feel a sense of belonging in this class,” 91% of respondents from the combined pool from Fall 2017, Spring 2018, and Fall 2018 (n=411) either somewhat agreed (43%) or agreed (48%).

Perhaps because of that sense of belonging or the feeling of comfort that comes with it, students reported high levels of willingness to speak in class. When asked if their willingness to speak had increased or decreased over the course of the semester, 63% of students responding to the Fall 2018 survey reported that their willingness to speak in class “increased a little” (38%) or “increased a lot” (25%). When asked why they were more willing to speak, 43% of students named being given time to reflect before contributing, 44% cited an atmosphere of openness, 34% noted that they knew they wouldn’t be interrupted, 48% acknowledged that “hearing different experiences made it easier to add my own,” and 38% noted that “going around the circle made it easier to know it was my turn.” Additionally, 16% of students felt that they needed to fill a silence.

There was no significant correlation between a willingness to speak and a sense that students within a class were likely to agree (.159, R squared variable resulting from regressions analysis). There was, however, a significant statistical correlation between self-reported willingness to speak and a self-reported sense of belonging in class (.449), a self-reported time in

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which the student shared personal identity to give perspective (.454), a self-reported willingness to ask direct questions (.413), and an expressed interest in wanting dialogue in other classes (.473).

Figure 2 - Correlations: Change in Willingness to Speak to Ability to Speak and Listen Across Difference Index, R squared variable from regression analysis.

Fall 2018

	Willing speak
Everyone contributes with disagreements	.137
Want dialogue in other classes	.473**
Dialogues helped understand feelings and beliefs	.406**
Helped feel understood	.395**
Willing to use dialogue beyond classroom	.347**
Different backgrounds committed to thriving	.224*
Sense of belonging	.449**
Felt positively about differing opinions	.278**
Willing to ask direct questions	.413**
Openly disagree	.408**
Shared personal experience understand point of view	.415**
Shared personal identity to give perspective	.454**
Listened respectfully	.249**
Group holding similar opinions?	.159

** indicates statistically significant correlation

When surveyed about their experiences speaking and listening across differences, students reported frequent use of curious questions designed to elicit deep understanding of other people, the ability to express personal experiences, values, and beliefs that led to their positioning, and resilience in hearing points of view that differed from their own. Of students taking the survey in Fall and Spring 2018, for example, 30% reported that the sentence “On more than one occasion, I shared personal experiences, values, or beliefs

that allowed others to understand my point of view” described them moderately well. 34.8% reported that the sentence described them very well, and 20% reported that it described them extremely well. Just 3.8% said that sentence did not describe them. Responding to the sentence, “On more than one occasion, I reconsidered my viewpoints based on others’ perspectives,” 9.7% of students from the combined Fall and Spring 2018 surveys responded that the sentence did not describe them, 20% reported that the sentence described them slightly well, 35.3% responded that the sentence described them moderately well, 26% responded that the sentence described them very well, and 9% responded that the sentence described them extremely well.

Faculty experiences using RSD to create dialogic classrooms were also positive, and in interviews conducted during semesters in which they were engaged in using dialogic techniques, including RSD, faculty spoke about the use of dialogue to increase and enhance student engagement, to support curiosity as an intellectual virtue, and to create classrooms that are student centered. One professor, for example, noted that:

What I think I learned from [the dialogues] has been a slow progression of appreciation for curiosity and what motivates students, and students being empowered and motivated. It’s so much more of a factor in the overall goal of educating someone. It’s been a slow progression of me realizing that, and this has been a capstone kind of—What do they call it when a wave comes crashing over? It’s been the tip of the wave of what I feel like has been a movement towards and appreciation for curiosity and openness.⁷

Another noted that the structure of the dialogues allowed students to overcome a fear of vulnerability, something she tied to intellectual resilience. As she commented in an interview:

Part of curiosity is saying, ‘No, I want to open myself up to the possibility that I’m wrong, I’m completely wrong about this, and I would like to learn [about it], and I would be fascinated to hear another perspective, to

⁷ Interview by Margie DeWeese-Boyd with G1*, Professor, Gordon College (May 16, 2018) [*indicates a pseudonym].

hear something that leads me to reconsider things I've always taken for granted.' But that takes a lot of courage to be engaged with it that way.⁸

Another faculty member commented that the use of dialogues “takes the fear out of the equation” for students who may feel vulnerable in less structured settings. “I think it frees up energy to be a good listener, to be a better listener, to integrate what people tell you and to think, ‘Wow! I never quite thought about it from this perspective.’”⁹

When asked about engagement in their classrooms, many faculty linked student engagement to classrooms structured with students at the center, something dialogues helped them to do. One professor noted that in dialogic classrooms, “Students are engaged enough that they can carry the conversation, that the class is established *as a class*, [there’s a] norm and practice, that that’s what’s happening. And I’m surprised! I find myself thinking new thoughts as a result of the conversation we’re having.”¹⁰ Another commented, as she reflected on learning to implement dialogue, “That was really the biggest thing I took away, was how to write really powerful questions where I could then take myself out of it and let the students really dig in.”¹¹

When well crafted, dialogic classrooms create spaces where students feel supported in being curious, speaking and listening across difference, and engaging with each other and course materials in meaningful ways that may create lasting social and intellectual change. We now turn to the architecture of those spaces before considering a case study that examines how such architecture was employed to reorient a graduate core seminar such that it opened space for broader social and intellectual possibilities.

III. NUTS AND BOLTS: BLUEPRINTS FOR BUILDING A DIALOGIC CLASSROOM

While Reflective Structured Dialogue is a central practice, dialogic classrooms do not employ structured dialogues every day (faculty report an

⁸ Interview by Margie DeWeese-Boyd. with G3*, Professor, Gordon College (May 18, 2018).

⁹ Interview by Margie DeWeese-Boyd with G2*, Professor, Gordon College (May 18, 2018).

¹⁰ Interview by Margie DeWeese-Boyd with G3*, Professor, Gordon College (May 18, 2018).

¹¹ Interview by Betsy Hayes with HR*, Professor, Bridgewater College (Dec. 6, 2018).

average of 3–4 per semester.)¹² Rather, structured dialogues are part of a larger ethos and orientation that dissolves dialogic values—curiosity, open-mindedness, reflection, speaking to be understood, listening to understand, interpersonal connection—into the heart of classroom structures and experiences.¹³ As one professor in our study put it, “There are a lot of values that weren’t necessarily only in the structured dialogues as such, but they seep into a lot of other things one might do.”¹⁴

A. Structure for Purpose

Like the spaces in which we live, play, work, and worship, classrooms function best when designed to meet the purpose for which they are intended. While we can’t always control the physical spaces we teach in (remember that classroom from hell), dialogic classrooms are designed with a conscious pedagogical structure aimed at fulfilling the goals of the course.¹⁵ This means that structured dialogues are often tiered, moving from relatively tame topics to more controversial ones as students build trust with each other and the process, and that there is a clear purpose for the dialogues as part of curricular goals. One teacher in our study, for example, had students dialogue about what it is to be an American before reading and discussing Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club*,¹⁶ an exercise that routinizes peer-to-peer discussion and opens avenues into the plurality of American experiences. Dialogic classrooms may also utilize a host of other processes and exercises designed to build trust, comfort, and accountability between students, and to practice the skills necessary for meaningful dialogic work. These may include short “dialogic moments” where professors ask students to reflect for a minute about something in their lives that relates to a topic relevant to the day’s lesson, improvisational exercises aimed at team-building and cooperation, or even short theater pieces

¹² Based on collected faculty interviews and observations conducted as part of the research study. “The Dialogic Classroom: Teaching for Humility and Civic Engagement.” <https://humilityandconviction.uconn.edu/globalresearchprojects/>.

¹³ For more on how dialogic classrooms integrate these values into daily structures, especially in times of disruption, see generally Jill DeTemple & John Sarrouf, *Disruption, Dialogue, and Swerve: Reflective Structured Dialogue in Religious Studies Classrooms*, 20 TEACHING THEOLOGY AND RELIGION 283 (2017).

¹⁴ Interview with Cullum Clark, Professor, Southern Methodist University (Apr. 20, 2018).

¹⁵ DeTemple & Sarrouf, *supra* note 12, at 287–88. See Grant Wiggins & Jay McTighe, UNDERSTANDING BY DESIGN (2nd ed. 2005), for an explanation of structuring courses to meet pedagogical goals, often referred to as “Backward Design.”

¹⁶ Faculty observation by John Sarrouf at Gordon College (Feb. 2018).

that may ask students to publicly, and cooperatively, relate some piece of their identity to class issues.¹⁷

B. *Say it Out Loud*

A key practice to creating a classroom with enough structure to hold encounters across difference is a voiced emphasis on open-mindedness and curiosity as intellectual virtues.¹⁸ Faculty do this in a variety of ways. Some ask students to recount a time when they felt either rejected or accepted simply because of an assumption someone made about them or a position they hold¹⁹; others ask students to complete Open Mind,²⁰ an app produced by Heterodox Academy that teaches students about why open-mindedness is sometimes difficult, but why it can be useful in various social settings. Other faculty introduce the concept as a subset of listening as a valued practice. “How do you know you are really being listened to?” one faculty member asks her class, “How can you do that for others?” Another professor asks students to tap into the values they have learned in the academy, asking them “How do you want to be in this class?” as an early class exercise meant to focus on academic and interpersonal values.²¹

This kind of public focus on values that are often assumed to exist in academic settings makes structures visible, and therefore, more accessible to students. This is key for the third element of dialogic classrooms: communication agreements.

C. *Map it: Rules of the Road*

Crafted early in the semester, communication agreements form the container that holds class discourse and relationships. While many classrooms operate with implicit rules for engagement, collectively crafting overt rules to which class members agree allows a facilitator, usually the professor, to

¹⁷ For example, Ping Chong’s work can be adapted for classroom use. See LPAContheMAP, *Beyond Sacred Documentary*, YOUTUBE (Dec. 11, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XktjcpGnacM>.

¹⁸ Jason Baehr, *Educating for Intellectual Virtues: From Theory to Practice*, 47 J. OF PHIL. OF EDUC. 248, 254 (2013).

¹⁹ Faculty observation by John Sarrouf at Southern Methodist University, March 1, 2018.

²⁰ See OPENMIND, <https://openmindplatform.org/> (last visited Apr. 8, 2020).

²¹ Faculty observations by Jill DeTemple at Gordon College (Aug. 1, 2018) and Southern Methodist University (Dec. 4, 2019 and Sept. 3, 2019).

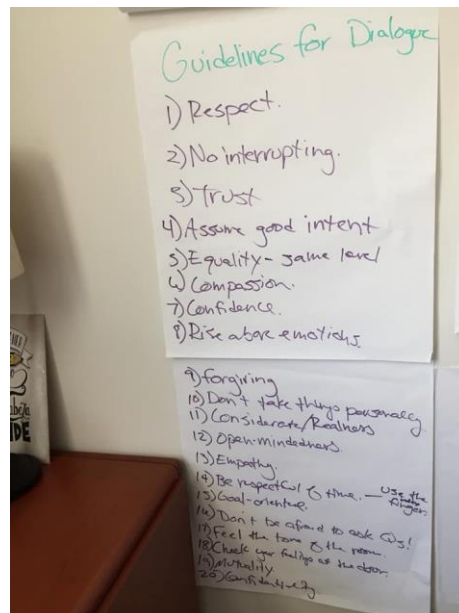
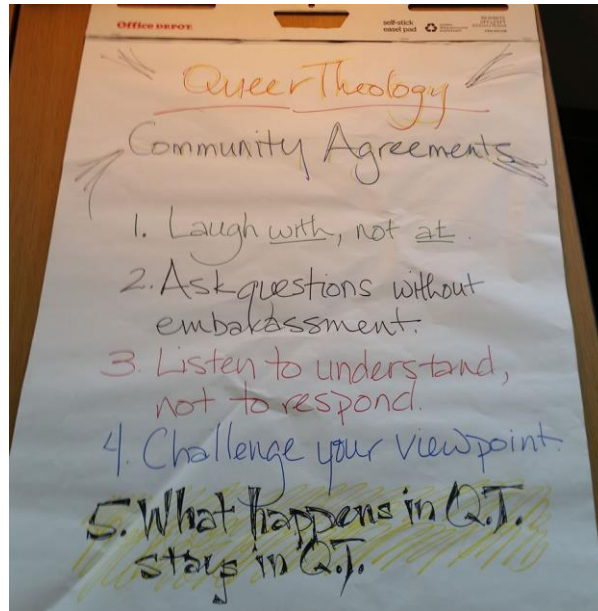
intervene when there is a violation.²² Crafting agreements is also another way to draw attention to dialogic values. If one value of the class is curiosity, then perhaps the class will agree that they want to ask curious questions as opposed to rhetorical ones. If listening is a virtue, then not interrupting may be an agreement that is important as people hold the intention to listen to one another. Agreements are also structures that hold space for agency. Confidentiality and the ability to pass, or pass for now, allow those who may be reticent or not be ready to share a story a way to take charge of their own level of participation. Crafting agreements allow students to discern what is important to them as they co-create a space designed for their learning together (figure three).²³

²² For more on intervention see *Guide to Conversations across the Blue-Red Divide*, ESSENTIAL PARTNERS, <https://whatisessential.org/red-blue> (last visited Apr. 8, 2020).

²³ Common agreements include “don’t interrupt,” “listen with resilience,” “speak to be understood,” “listen to understand,” “confidentiality,” “pass” and “pass for now.” The way these are articulated depends on local contexts.

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Figure Three – Agreements Generated by Students in a Queer Theology class (photo, Peter Carlson); and Prison Exchange class (photo, Meredith Minister)



D. Make Space for Time: Reflection

A key component of Reflective Structured Dialogue is timed reflection, designed to allow people to break cycles of reaction and more deeply engage with and articulate the histories, values, and experiences that led themselves and others to positions and beliefs.²⁴ Dialogic classrooms invite regular reflection through reflective exercises such as journals or discussion posts, entrance or exit tickets that ask students to write a question at the beginning or end of class, or “dialogic moments” that ask students to reflect for a minute or two on a topic related to course content.²⁵ Asking students to take a minute and think about a time when they did or did not understand the purpose of something, for example, may lead to a more productive class on teleological theories of existence; asking students to reflect on a personification of death may lead to greater curiosity about a subject from which many students feel distanced.²⁶ Reflection thus not only breaks reactive cycles, but also allows students to connect often new or unfamiliar course content to something they already know, creating new and effective cognitive connections.²⁷

E. Shift the Focus: Re-center Engagement

Traditional classrooms are centered on teachers physically and socially. Lecture halls with fixed seating are designed so that every student in the room can see the teacher (and the teacher can see every student in the room), but not so that students can see one another or easily become the focus of attention themselves. The presumption behind these designs is what Paulo Freire described as a “banking knowledge” of education where an expert is able to “deposit” information in students with who will receive it with no regard to context, shared or divergent histories, or multiple interpretive

²⁴ Sallyann Roth, *Speaking the Unspoken: A Work-Group Consultation to Reopen Dialogue*, in *SECRETS IN FAMILIES AND FAMILY THERAPY* 268 (Evan Imber-Black ed.) (1993).

²⁵ Essential Partners, Inc., *Ways to Teach When the World is on Fire: The Dialogic Classroom: Teaching for Humility and Engagement* (2017) (unpublished manuscript).

²⁶ Both of these examples come from student survey accounts of dialogic moments they described positively.

²⁷ JANE FRIED, *OF EDUCATION, FISHBOWLS, AND RABBIT HOLES: RETHINKING TEACHING AND LIBERAL EDUCATION FOR AN INTERCONNECTED WORLD*, 43 (2016); JOSHUA R. EYLER, *HOW HUMANS LEARN: THE SCIENCE AND STORIES BEHIND EFFECTIVE COLLEGE TEACHING*, 158–60 (2018).

possibilities.²⁸ Dialogic classrooms disrupt this model by inviting, supporting, and encouraging multifocal engagement between professors, students, and course material.

Students in dialogic classrooms report that they feel freer to ask questions of peers, and professors note that they are more easily able to “get out of the way” as students become accustomed to engaging each other directly. Such multifocal engagement requires more of students, and more of faculty as they must create the structures to support a model where they themselves are not always at the center, and where listening is held up as a form of engagement on par with speaking. Students cannot be the passive learners described in Freire’s model, but must rather continually contribute to the educational spaces they occupy. Professors need to become comfortable trusting that students can carry the weight of that intellectual work. The result is classrooms that are the kinds of dynamic spaces faculty generally describe as their ideal classrooms where students freely engage with the material and each other, and where the faculty role shifts to one of facilitation as much as that of the knowledge bearer.

F. *Hold the Space: Actively Facilitate*

While re-centering a classroom may appear to be a dereliction of duty to an outsider who walks in to a classroom to discover students in circles and passing timers around so that they have equal time to listen and speak while their professor is watching quietly from a corner, this is far from the case. Facilitation is not a traditional way of understanding teaching, but dialogic classrooms require the kind of structuring and careful attention that facilitation as a practice describes. Effective facilitators do the bulk of their work on the front end: understanding the needs of those they support, including the purpose of the event they will facilitate; crafting a space of encounter that supports those needs; and then making sure the encounter happens in such a way that the purpose is met.²⁹ This may mean reminding people of the purpose of the encounter, or stopping or redirecting an interaction that will be detrimental to that purpose.

Teaching as facilitation shares these characteristics. In dialogic classrooms, faculty craft entire classes, from the syllabus to final exercises, with an eye toward creating a space that will allow their students to fully

²⁸ PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED: 50TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION* 72 (Myra Bergman Ramos trans.) (2017); *See also* BELL HOOKS, *TEACHING TO TRANSGRESS: EDUCATION AS THE PRACTICE OF FREEDOM* 14 (1994).

²⁹ For a helpful and detailed description of effective facilitation, see generally PRIYA PARKER, *THE ART OF GATHERING: HOW WE MEET AND WHY IT MATTERS* (2018).

engage with course content, with their own knowledge and convictions, and with each other.³⁰ They ensure that this engagement continues by providing structured spaces of encounter and including structured dialogues that students understand as invitations to gain greater knowledge about something important. Like any good facilitator, professors in effective dialogic classrooms know how to intervene and redirect in order to get back to the purpose, be that by enforcing communication agreements or reminding students of that purpose in reflective moments, assignments of various kinds, or in-class exercises designed to strengthen academic or interpersonal skills. While the focus is not on themselves, they do keep the focus, allowing and maintaining the kind of reorientation that dialogic classrooms provide.³¹

When dialogic classrooms fail in their goals it is usually because one of the structures above was not built or maintained. Students asked to recall a dialogue they participated in during a class sometimes reported experiences that remained centered on the professor, as in the case of one who wrote that, “A dialogue situation that occurred in the classroom this semester happened on a few occasions where a student asked the professor [their] opinion and the professor did not answer the student’s question directly, instead the professor changed the subject.” The student in this instance does not appear to be able to distinguish dialogic interactions as outside other classroom structures, nor does it appear that the student was able to establish the relationship they wanted with the professor in terms of trust or engagement.

In other instances, students complained about a lack of viewpoint diversity in their dialogue circles, something intentional structuring for variety could remedy, or professors saying that they were going to do a dialogue and then continuing to lecture. In other instances, faculty reported being frustrated that students did not seem to embrace the dialogues, actively resisting them as “outside” the purpose of the course. In these instances, something about the course structure, combined perhaps with expectations generated in broader educational environments, impeded the effectiveness of dialogic experiences. While the method was there, the reorientation and structure required to support it was not.

³⁰ Jill DeTemple et. al., *Reflective Structured Dialogue: A Conversation with 2018 American Academy of Religion Excellence in Teaching Award Winner Jill DeTemple* 2 TEACHING THEOLOGY AND RELIGION 223, 228 (2019).

³¹ ROBERT A. BARUCH BUSH & JOSEPH P. FOLGER, THE PROMISE OF MEDIATION: THE TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH 209–214 (2005).

IV. COMING IN SIDEWAYS: A CASE STUDY IN REORIENTING A GRADUATE CORE SEMINAR

Core seminars in Ph.D. programs—classes designed to orient students, usually in cohorts, to their chosen field of study—are unique spaces within the academy. They are often tied to comprehensive exams, which students must complete with a passing grade in order to pass to candidacy for the Ph.D., and they are often one of the few places where entire cohorts are together in any systematic way during their program of study. While generally conceived as a space of knowledge acquisition, core seminars are a pillar of identity formation in programmatic contexts.³² What happens there helps distinguish a Ph.D. from Brown from one awarded by the University of Chicago. They carry enormous weight.

This burden can make core seminars fraught spaces. Students may feel the need to compete with one another, or may enter the class with hostility or resentment that they are required to master material in which they believe they have no interest, that will not help them in their professional lives, or that they fear they cannot master. Faculty generally receive no training in how to craft or facilitate graduate seminars³³ and may themselves feel vulnerable as the seminars can easily become spaces where their knowledge and authority may be challenged. Core seminars can easily become places where people are vigilant, waiting for an assault on scholarly or personal commitments, a state that leads to stuck conversations and reactive rather than reflective interactions, leaving little room for the values of cooperation, curiosity, or open-mindedness that many of us are hoping to instill in the next generation of researchers and scholars.

To make matters worse, graduate core seminars often work on the same dysfunctional dynamic as political polarization. Polarization works on an axis of reduction that ignores complexity in favor of singularity³⁴. A neighbor who loves birds, volunteers for the PTA, and is well respected in his professional setting simply becomes “Joe the Republican.” Another who plays in a local band, keeps an immaculate yard, and is known for rescuing strays becomes “Shira the Democrat.” This flattening of complex identities and commitments continues the cycles of vigilance that may not allow us to engage with anyone perceived to be “on the other side.”

In a similar way, graduate students are regularly reduced in their identities. What matters in seminars and other academic settings is their

³² Vicki Sweitzner, *Towards a Theory of Doctoral Student Professional Identity Development: A Developmental Networks Approach*, 80 THE J. OF HIGHER EDUC. 3 (2009).

³³ Sara Steen et. al., *Rethinking the Graduate Seminar*, 27 TEACHING SOC. 167 (1999).

³⁴ Roth, *supra* note 23, at 271.

advisor, their dissertation topics, their theoretical commitments, and their CV-worthy accomplishments. Students become attuned to perceived slights or intellectual threat, often to the detriment of basic functioning, much less cooperative inquiry.³⁵ A core seminar I taught several years ago very much operated on this model. Split between graduate students who considered themselves theologians and those who considered themselves historians, members of the class were on constant alert for perceived attack on their commitments. Though we muddled through, I was aware of side conversations in the small room after seemingly innocuous exchanges, and several students came to see me to express their frustration with a classroom dynamic that no one could precisely name until the second-to-last class. We finished the semester with a cookie cake that proclaimed, “No Weasels!” an homage to a comment the week before when a student had asked, in essence, to be heard. It was a brutal semester, another version of the classroom from hell.

When facing a different core seminar in the Fall of 2019, I had some trepidation. The roster revealed a potentially greater rift in intellectual commitments, and the subject matter was difficult: early religious studies theory and method, most of which is rooted in colonial and racist histories that make it difficult to imagine using in any relevant way in 21st century scholarship. I found myself preparing for resistance and broken dynamics before the semester began, but crafted a syllabus that looked remarkably like the one I had used in that difficult seminar from several years before, though with some dialogic elements thrown in as I thought it would be useful to acquaint graduate students with dialogic pedagogies.

It was not until about ten days before the beginning of the semester, and after a conversation with some colleagues that led me to the realization that political polarization and bad graduate dynamics are related, that I considered reorienting the entire course so that it more thoroughly reflected the dialogic principles and practices I had been working to develop in undergraduate settings. It felt extraordinarily risky. What if graduate students, more formed academically than their undergraduate peers, would not follow such an unusual lead? Could I structure things enough to make them feel comfortable in letting down carefully cultivated personas so that they could

³⁵ Sweitzner, *supra* note 31, at 6–8, 12–16). Of note is the way Sweitzer catalogues the effect of relationships exogenous to the academy in addition to peer and mentor networks in professional identity formation, something long unrecognized in educational literature and practice. The negative effects of professional identity development around narrow educational and intellectual commitments I mention above are widely recognized, but as Sweitzer explains, relatively unstudied. *See also* Davin J. Carr-Chellman & Carol Rogers Shaw, “Do the Hard Work”: Identity Development and First Year Doctoral Students, ADULT EDUCATION RESEARCH CONFERENCE (2017), <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2017/papers/3>.

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connect across intellectual and personal differences? How would exercises that worked to form connection and community in undergraduate settings translate when professional identities were on the line? I decided to take the risk.

The result was a class that, while not perfect, did overcome many of the problems in those earlier seminars. There was no need for a cookie cake at the end of the semester. Students connected across disciplinary boundaries and approaches. They exhibited openness towards course content throughout the term and were able to use that content deftly in final papers and projects. They were unusually engaged in the three-hour class meetings, which often ran a bit over time as conversations were lively and ongoing. I did not dread facing the seminar each week, or the fallout from class confrontations gone wrong. It was a pleasure to teach.

So, what changed? What does such a reorientation entail? First, I changed the syllabus. Not the course content—the readings remained the same and encompassed the same core intellectual material the seminar was designed to deliver. Instead, I changed the way the syllabus presented that material. Rather than present the history of the field as a body of knowledge to be mastered as part of curricular requirements for the program, the standard language from the catalogue, I invited students to consider that body of knowledge as a history to which they must orient. Presenting an image of a glacier on the front page of the syllabus, I invoked a metaphor: like the glacier, the history of religious studies has carved deep channels in which you must position yourselves. Once you understand those channels, what will you choose to reify, what will you choose to reform, and what will you choose to reject? Will you choose to stand squarely in the middle of those channels, off to one side, or will you try to change their directions? Such a presentation shifted the intellectual structure of the class from one of content mastery to one of exploration with a goal of conscious engagement. One cannot be removed when asked to make such a decision.

To support this goal, I added regular reflection exercises, including structured dialogues, that asked students to consider their positioning in response to readings, theories, and concepts we considered as part of course content. Students were asked to think about issues of rationality, representation, and identity in the classroom settings by telling a personal story that would help others understand how they came to think about such topics, and then digging deeper into the values and beliefs underneath those experiences, as well as complexities that pulled students in different directions. Dialogic moments asked them to think about times when class assignments they experienced had either supported or undermined educational goals, where they thought authors were strong in their writing and where they

left questions unanswered, and reflections on what they were leaving behind or taking away from a reading or class session. Three short papers codified these reflections into formal written work, marking the value of such thinking in academically measurable ways.

All of these exercises were supported by a dialogic class structure that included communication agreements students co-created early in the semester. The agreements included:

- Careful use of Tone
- Confidentiality
- Need Everyone's Opinions -- they might be helpful
- Look for Commonalities
- Speak to be Understood/Listen to Understand
- It's not a Competition
- Conversations Should be Linked to a Purpose
- You can Pass or Pass for Now
- Freedom of Disagreement is a Value.

The agreements to look for commonality and that it's not a competition, especially, set a markedly different tone for discourse than previous versions of the seminar.

In addition to the reoriented syllabus and communication agreements, I used several exercises to reorient and strengthen relationships in the room between students, students and course materials, and students and me as instructor. Many of these came from improv theater and were designed to make students aware of and able to shift focus in a room both directly and laterally, or to generate new and intuitive ideas individually and as a group. As the seminar settled into a rhythm after the first several weeks, we would open most classes with an exercise called "five things." Designed to elicit quick responses on stage, five things is a useful exercise to encourage students in making declarative sentences and generating ideas without too much hesitation. To do five things, everyone stands in a circle. One person starts by asking the person to their left to name five things. For example, I might begin by saying, "John, name five things in your refrigerator." John would then do so, with the class counting together after each individual item. Hesitation sounds, the "ums" and "ahs" we use when we're not sure of what to say, can be penalized by adding another item. Once a person has answered, they turn to the person next to them and ask for a different five things.

My intention in introducing five things was to teach students a skill for writing (it is often better to simply put things on paper than to wait for a perfect sentence or paragraph to form), and to practice speaking declaratively

and without qualification, something that can be difficult to do when one is aware of every potential theoretical problem with a statement or when one is vigilant and waiting for reprisal. The exercise did that work. Students became adept at speaking clearly, and they reported that the exercise helped them in early writing projects as they had naturalized the process. The real magic, however, became clear as the things people were asked to list became more personal over the course of the semester, working to recognize people's complex identities in the room. One student from out of state was asked for five reasons her local football team lost in a game the weekend before; another student was asked for the five best things about being a father the week after his first child was born; another was asked about five classes he wished he had taken as an undergraduate, a query that allowed us to understand a complex intellectual biography.

As I was part of the circle, students were able to interact with me as well, asking me to name cities, foods, and other things that allowed me to be a person as well as instructor. Often, the tensions that I had noticed in the previous seminar were expressed with humor and curiosity as theologians were asked to talk about authors in their field or historians were asked to name time periods that most or least interested them. The structure of the game, and the classroom in which it took place, allowed students to invite wholistic versions of themselves into the room. No one was vigilant for attack. No side conversations were required. No one ended up crying in my office. Students were unusually good at listening to one another and asking curious questions for elaboration or clarification.

Perhaps most strikingly, the students in this version of the core seminar were willing to take social and intellectual risks. Because of the vigilance present in previous versions of the course, students were reticent to try anything outside of an ordinary discussion format in class. When I asked them to render a classical religious studies theory as a drawing, haiku, or limerick, for example, they performed at a much lower level than a typical undergraduate class tasked with the same assignment. For fear of not getting it perfectly right, they could not do it at all. The structure of a dialogic classroom, however, made space for the kind of creativity and play that often lead to effective learning.³⁶ This was most evident in final papers and projects that reflected a willingness to stretch intellectually, even when it felt uncertain. Such a stretch resulted in truly innovative scholarship, some of which was of publishable quality, an unusual outcome for core seminar research projects.

Student feedback in course evaluations and personal communication after the end of the class was overwhelmingly positive, though one student was clearly alienated by the model, unable to understand how it might be

³⁶ EYLER, *supra* note 26, at 99–100.

useful as a “serious academic.” A few others, while appreciating the social space of the seminar, were concerned that taking time to connect and think about issues of identity, representation, and pedagogy meant that we did not have as much time for what they considered the “real” content of the class. This is a balance that I will have to contend with going forward, and I will make some adjustments to better accommodate more traditional discussions in some instances, though, again, their work in discussions and in papers and projects indicates that students did master the core material of the course. Indeed, for one student, the experience was transformative. After a theater exercise on the last day, designed to elicit a summative declaration of identity and purpose in relation to the body of knowledge we had spent a semester exploring, the student sent a brief note of thanks, explaining that the way the course was structured, and that particular exercise, showed the student a space in academia that the student could not have imagined previously, and which they described as “a beautiful space of scholarship and creativity.”³⁷

Reorienting the seminar so that we went in sideways—placing students’ orientation to core course material instead of the material itself at the center, and taking overt steps to craft a learning community with commitments to open inquiry, cooperation, and listening—resulted in a vastly improved space of learning. Based on this experience and the data presented in the first part of this paper, it is reasonable to hope that such reorientation holds promise in other pedagogical and civic spaces, including those of law and alternative dispute resolution and the spaces into which they feed.

V. SHIFTING THE SPACE: POSSIBILITIES FOR OUT THERE

Here, I need to make a disclaimer: I am not a lawyer, did not go to law school, and am not involved in alternative dispute resolution as a practice. I thus base my remarks not on authority in those fields, but on a sense of purpose I imagine I share with those invested in legal processes and their alternatives outside of the court system. In short, those of us who spend our days training lawyers or other future professionals and citizens, working in law, or in the ADR system, are invested in relationships that form communities. Bettering people’s abilities to form and perform relationships in professional and social settings is in our best interest as a society. Creating spaces where this can best happen is a task we share.

How, then, might we implement dialogic structures in these spaces? The trick, I think, is not to begin with the structures themselves, but rather with

³⁷ Letter from Anonymous, Student, Southern Methodist University, to Jill DeTemple, Professor, Southern Methodist University (Dec. 4, 2019) (on file with author).

the values they are intended to support and the realities they are intended to address; a process that will relate the impact of a dialogic structure with the intentions of its framers. The values upheld in dialogic classrooms—intellectual humility, open-mindedness, curiosity, cooperation, reflexivity, and resilience—encourage learned behaviors that are vital to broader civic spaces and which can flourish within them. A student demonstrated this succinctly when she tapped me on the shoulder one day during my office hours in our campus coffee shop. “I just wanted to thank you,” she said, “Thanksgiving was SO much better this year!”

Indeed, the values named above are vital for the maintenance of relationships across differences, a key ingredient for a healthy society. Following conflict transformation specialist and dialogic classroom architect John Sarrouf, communities (or indeed relationships of all kinds) are only as strong as their ability to connect across difference, and that connection takes courage.³⁸ Structuring client meetings, mediation sessions, or even law school classrooms in ways that allow people to acknowledge and hold difference inverts usual norms that place processes and procedures before people, and content before connection. Going the other way and centering relationships—be it by creating ways to “check in” before a meeting, careful attention to times given to listen and speak, or in time set aside for reflection—can shift professional, civic, and even familial spaces in favor of dialogic values, and thus dialogic relationships that allow connection across differences in worldview and/or experiences. These are skills students and practitioners can take with them as they move “out there,” to PTA meetings, neighborhood gatherings, family dinners, or discussions in houses of worship. Especially in a polarized society, putting relationships first has the effect of giving people deep contours and context that polarization steals away.

Taking steps to hold up listening as a valued skill is another lesson dialogic classrooms have to give. In most educational and professional environments, speaking is supported. We teach students how to give presentations, make arguments, debate, and persuade in written form, and reward speaking behaviors with grades, curricular credit, and accolades when done especially well. While speaking is an essential skill for professional life, we often skip over listening, presuming that students know how to do it appropriately and well. Taking the time to reflect on how to listen, and then practicing and rewarding listening, establishes listening as a valued way of interacting in educational and social spaces that extend well beyond the classroom. Polarizing discourse often discourages deep listening; doing so

³⁸ Q Boston, *The Courage to Cross the Street: and What to Do Next*, YOUTUBE (Jan. 28, 2018), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=set30hYH_DU.

may be considered an act of treachery by one's tribe or faction.³⁹ The practice of listening, then, and the skills to do it well, can become an act of healing when deployed across lines of difference in grocery stores, beauty parlors, or at the local bar.⁴⁰

Dialogic classrooms also demonstrate that naming and practicing open-mindedness and curiosity as virtues can shift social spaces in productive ways. Certainly, these are values already in place in law and mediation environments. What dialogic classrooms teach, however, is that structuring processes so that such values are raised up, creates an operational environment that allows greater and more focused practice. Lawyers may be more thorough when they are curious about evidence; ADR practitioners may be more effective when they are creating an environment that invites genuine questions amongst clients. And again, acts of curiosity and open-mindedness can work in broader social contexts to disrupt the patterns that reinforce polarizing discourses. Asking someone about an experience that led them to a belief is a radically different act than asking how they could possibly hold such a belief, and a more productive one.

But how do we craft the spaces in which we can champion the values of relationship, deep listening, curiosity, and open-mindedness, especially in a polarized climate? This is trickier business, especially as most social spaces are not as centralized as classrooms. There is no syllabus for most cocktail parties, no reading assigned for shared flights or train rides, no physical space of gathering that allows people to sit in a circle online. The demise of communication agreements, broadly defined, is often bemoaned in widely shared laments over the death of civil discourse, especially in political contexts.⁴¹

What the dialogic classroom work teaches is that well-crafted questions produced in the context of articulated values have the effect of

³⁹ Amy Chua & Jed Rubenfeld, *The Threat of Tribalism*, THE ATLANTIC (Oct. 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/the-threat-of-tribalism/568342/>. For two studies that examine polarization in the United States, see also PEW RESEARCH CENTER, *Political Polarization in the American Public* (June 12, 2014), <https://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>; STEPHEN HAWKINS ET AL., *HIDDEN TRIBES: A STUDY OF AMERICA'S POLARIZED LANDSCAPE* (2018).

⁴⁰ Stephanie Kimball & Jim Garrison, *Hermeneutic Listening: An Approach to Understanding in Multicultural Conversations*, 15 STUDIES IN PHIL. AND EDUC. 51–52.

⁴¹ Gerald F. Seib, *Civil Discourse is in Decline, Where Does it End?*, WALL ST. J. (May 29, 2017), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/civil-discourse-in-decline-where-does-it-end-1496071276>; Michael A. Cohen, *Who's to Blame for America's Civility Crisis?*, BOSTON GLOBE (June 26, 2018), <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2018/06/26/who-blame-for-american-civility-crisis/RQ4Pwip3kmUzuWeHRcNeIL/story.html>.

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creating space for engagement in novel and meaningful ways.⁴² To put it another way, the questions we ask, and the way we listen, powerfully shape the spaces we make for engagement. They shape the possibilities for relationships and communities, even in divisive times. Asking a genuine question: “Tell me a story that would help me understand . . .” is a small opening that can grow and strengthen as people enter a space of productive vulnerability together. It takes courage to cross a divide with curiosity; it takes courage to tell a story that someone else may not want to hear. Leaning into that discomfort, however, is a powerful act, one that we can teach, support, and in which we can engage in spaces near and far.

This, in and of itself, is not new for ADR practitioners, or even for those in law, though the methods and case studies I have described may be. What the classroom work reveals, however, is the possibility that such questions hold when they are not used in the service of deliberation. Dialogic classrooms are not designed to reach consensus, or even compromise. They are rigorously bounded, and driven, by the cause of exploration. This is what sets them apart from other places where many of the same techniques—open enquiry, reflective listening, facilitation done with an emphasis on multi-partiality—are employed.

While powerful, the spaces shaped in dialogic classrooms are limited. They are prolegomena, the beginning frame. Where we need more than beginning—where we need deliberation toward consensus, where we need final decisions that will shape policies and the formal contours of a shared civic life—we will need structures that go beyond what I have outlined here. Students who speak of “making Thanksgiving SO much better” and of being reoriented to the possibilities of creativity in academic spaces lead me to believe that this is possible, perhaps even probable, when we give them the proper tools to construct a foundation upon which such structures can be built. The spaces we make are the spaces students will adapt, reorient, replicate, and rebuild in places that go well beyond the classroom. Wisdom demands we attend carefully to those spaces, to their consequences, and to their possibilities.

⁴² This conclusion is drawn from student research surveys, noted earlier, that indicate that dialogic classrooms resulted in greater student abilities in listening, speaking, and engagement across difference. Questions designed to invoke curiosity and connection are a central part of the dialogic classroom training offered to faculty as part of the research study. For more on effective questions in dialogic contexts see *Designing Questions*, <https://whatisessential.org/higher-ed/designing-questions>.

