

Should Teachers Advance Justice or Reduce Polarization?

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Should teachers encourage students to give “all sides” a fair hearing when discussing controversial/sensitive issues? Should they also inspire students to commit absolutely to ideals like racial equity? In other words, should teachers be responsible for both decreasing polarization and advancing justice?

According to organizations such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the answer is yes. AERA is the national professional society for scholars of education, which aims to improve education research and its use for the public good. Their 2021 conference theme was “accepting responsibility,” which they define in terms of these two aims. Polarization reflects a failure of the schools; the AERA Call states:

....all legislators and elected officials attended school; most are college graduates. Yet far too many learned far too little in those places about how to respectfully engage across partisan lines and avert polarization. Listening, understanding, and reasonably considering the viewpoints of persons beyond one’s own political party are skills educators failed to teach those who

go on to make consequential policy decisions that affect entire nations.¹

This exhortation to listen/insistence on the importance of listening to people in the opposing party and consider their views is not meant to undermine support for a particular conception of justice. Indeed, reducing polarization is framed as complementary to fighting oppression, even if some poles of a given debate are believed to perpetuate it. Therefore, educators and the

education researchers who work with them must, in AERA’s language, simultaneously “reject apolitical stances” toward pressing social concerns, while also reduce polarization regarding these issues.

AERA is not alone: educators and the broader public often lament both injustice and the breakdown of civil discourse. Yet how can educators both diminish polarization regarding the most contested political questions and, at the same time, advance one contested point of view to the exclusion of others? Are Americans not polarized on the interpretation of precisely the issues that AERA names as clear injustices, such as “racism, xenophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, [and] homophobia?” And might inspiring teachers and the students they work with to fight injustice not *increase* polarization if other people hold opposing views that students view as contributing to injustice?

I consider these issues in light of a series of structured dialogue sessions between politically opposed university students. I observed these sessions between 2017 - 2019 and conducted in-depth interviews with 52 students in the weeks following their dialogue participation. I also interviewed 21 of the students again in Fall 2020, three years after they attended a dialogue, to understand what meaning, if any, these conversations still held for them. These dialogue sessions did not in any straightforward way decrease polarization regarding divisive topics or mobilize students to fight what they identify as injustice. Students rarely changed their views on substantive issues. But what did happen – and frequently – is that students changed their views of the people on the other side of those issues, reducing what is often called “affective” polarization. My interviews suggest that this occurs through understanding

¹ American Educational Research Association, 2021 Call for Submissions

not why a reason is universally superior, but why a reason is reasonable for this particular person. A crucial dimension of this is the capacity to recognize that the other person is motivated by a moral source, even if it is different from one's own.

Maximally, a student may reconsider whether and how their own political choices align with her beliefs in light of the questions asked by another. Being asked to give a narrative account of one's reasons can spark the desire to investigate whether one is enacting one's own commitments well. This kind of self-questioning, though, occurred only for a few students and tended to arise in interviews I conducted years after the dialogue session, in which students reflected on its role in their larger journey. In the weeks following the dialogue session, students tended to remain firmly grounded in their own positions and to see students on the other side as politically wrong but ethically relatable. The implications of this are more ambiguous than a clear reduction in polarization or mobilization against injustice. Yet this recognition may still reduce support for violence against people with whom one disagrees, which is an accomplishment in a democracy ripped apart by violence or the threat of it.

What Kind of Rationality?

The assumption that teachers can both diminish polarization and advance justice seems to rest on the idea that students can discover the call of justice through rational discourse. If we can listen to each other and exchange reasons, we can win adherents to social justice causes and also reduce the distance between us. Two different conceptions of rationality may be at work in this idea: either that racist and other oppressive ideologies can be shown to be internally inconsistent and therefore illogical, or that rationality will attune us to a sense of the "good," defined as anti-racism and the promotion of equity.

Yet while political dialogue retains the potential to facilitate a shared view of justice

through reason, such discussions seem not to do so inevitably or even routinely. Students in the dialogues I observed rarely reasoned their way to a completely different view of a significant issue. This is in part because the conflict was often not over whether something is good, but how much it matters *to a person* compared to some other good. Students tend to talk past each other to the issue that matters more to them.

So while all students in these sessions agreed that racist language and practices are wrong, some felt this keenly, while others extended their passion to other issues. Students may understand that something is good but fail to act on this in their political choices because something else matters more to them. At stake is not only what is "rational," but also who cares about what.

If students are less likely to reason their way to consensus regarding issues of justice, what might be the more readily available benefits of political dialogue? If, as some theorists now argue, the aim of deliberation is to deepen consideration of others' reasons, what would lead students to do so and with what implications?

Reasons Rather than Reason

For the novelist George Eliott, reason forms a different purpose than the universalizing operations described above. When we reason, we do not simply seek consistency or attune to an objective good. Rather, we attempt to understand why a reason is a reason for a person. According to a scholar of the novelist, for Eliott:

To grasp someone's intentions is to situate them within a narrative....to fit an intention within a story is to see how that intention makes an action comprehensible as a rational thing to do.²

An act is rational not universally but *for a person*; we understand its rationality by drawing nearer to the narrative conception of a life within which the reason is situated.

² Fessenbecker, Patrick. "Sympathy, Vocation, and Moral Deliberation in George Eliot." *ELH* 85, no. 2 (2018): 501-532.

It is this aspiration that was most resonant for the students in dialogue as well as most available to them. This process neither reduces issue-based polarization nor advances social justice – at least, not independently and not inevitably. Take for example a 2017 dialogue between James, a White Republican college student who voted for Trump, and Malik, an African American college student who voted for Clinton. They discussed the issue of football players kneeling during the National Anthem to protest police violence. James opposed the protest, believing the players were disrespecting the flag. Malik supported the protest.

What changed through dialogue was not their views about kneeling, but rather their understanding of how the other's reasons could be reasons for him. James admits:

I don't think I had ever heard the viewpoint of African Americans on the subject. I think I had always just been listening to Trump talk about it or friends or people on Fox News or whatever news network I was listening to....I hadn't really listened intently to why an African American would feel that it's an important form of protest....I definitely gained new insight into their perspective, which is very important. Ultimately my opinion on the matter has not changed. I still think it's disrespectful to kneel for the flag. But at least now I have a greater sense of empathy for why people are doing it. I definitely do agree that there is a need for people who are feeling oppressed to express their discontent. I think that's extremely important....It's like they say, it's inherently American to protest. Well, that's only that way because the flag makes it so, because American freedoms allow us to protest....but I can empathize with the root of their protest, in that they feel they're not being represented properly and they feel that they're being disadvantaged in some

capacity, and they're looking to elevate that conversation.

James has not changed his opinion of the issue, then, but rather has changed his opinion of the people with whom he disagrees. And this is precisely what Malik perceived: that he had not changed James' mind, but that James had gained an appreciation for his reasons. Malik derived satisfaction from this form of understanding, reflecting, "I felt that I was heard instead of just tolerated." Malik continued:

I think the most meaningful moment was when [James] and me, we got a chance to express our opinions about kneeling. Even though he didn't necessarily like it, he heard me out on the reasons why people would do it. And he understood it's a form of protest.... For him to at least get an understanding of....how some minorities feel, and that the practice of kneeling was to express how we're treated....So I think even if he didn't necessarily agree with the protest, he understood what the protest was for.... I think it's meaningful for him to hear and understand because it gets him to acknowledge....another person's perspective. And I think whether he changes, which I don't think he will change his view about the kneeling, it brings awareness to the fact that there's an issue with the way that minorities are treated. ... I don't think that was something that he could *not hear*.

For educators concerned with social justice, James' learning from Malik may seem woefully inadequate. Indeed, there is much to critique in James' statements. First, the conversation has not advanced social justice directly. James has not become a supporter of a protest movement that many consider the most crucial civil rights struggle of our era. Moreover, the dialogue may have in fact done harm. Some critics³ can say that James can now better enjoy his privilege as a White man secure in the knowledge that he has listened to the other side and expressed empathy without having to make any concrete changes.

³ Jones, Alison. "Talking cure: The desire for dialogue." *Counterpoints* 240 (2004): 57-67.

Finally, given that James and Malik still operate on opposite poles of the political spectrum, the conversation has not clearly reduced polarization.

This all suggests that dialogue is a limited tool for advancing the twin aims of advancing social justice and reducing issue-based polarization. Dialogue is unlikely to serve as a tool of political change in the ways that protest, voting, lawsuits, and other advocacy work must, nor is it likely to moderate views on divisive issues.

Yet important public goods are served nonetheless by attending to the sources of another's position. First, one advantage of this form of dialogue is precisely that it fails to reduce polarization. This may be good because some issues warrant hardline views and democratic participation may be galvanized by passionate commitment.⁴ While many people, myself among them, may wish to see James abandon Trump and support the movement for Black lives, dialogue that aims too steadily at consensus may be at least as likely to sideline Malik's perspective, as many critics⁵ of the inequities of deliberation have argued. That students *do not* readily abandon their commitments may be a redeeming feature of dialogue.

Second, revealing that a person is motivated by a sense of the good, or at least by an understandable human predicament, can help humanize opponents and legitimize their participation in democracy. At the least, while James is unlikely to show up at a Black Lives Matter protest, he may also be less likely to support violence against people who do show up. And he may even begin to question his support for candidates who stoke such violence. He may even question the tendency among elected officials and his peers to dismiss such protests, recalling that the protestors may have reasons that he understands.

It is this capacity to recognize the ethical nature of another's motivation, even though one has not been persuaded by their conclusions -- and without weakening one's own commitments -- that makes dialogue uniquely valuable. And it

was this capacity that was most readily available to students across my interviews.

For example, in another 2017 dialogue between students from a conservative Christian university who had voted for Trump and students from an elite secular university who had voted for Clinton, in the short-term, none of the students were persuaded that those who had voted for the other candidate had made the right choice. But they did see, for the first time, the sense of the good that motivated those others. One liberal student, Michael, reflected that he was typically "disgusted by people" who voted for Trump. But he saw that students who voted for Trump were, in his words, "innocent." There was a sense of the good that motivated them, since "if they legitimately think that Hillary was a baby killer....we can't really assume that they support everything Trump's doing" and therefore "they certainly didn't deserve to be called fascists or assholes or idiots or Nazis."

Similarly, a conservative student, Allen, remarked, "I'm a little ashamed to realize that my presuppositions were that liberals are supporting their ideas from a position of hate or....social control." After speaking to a Clinton supporter, he reflected, "I would imagine there's more people than I expected....who are thinking positively about it and really have hope and high ideals and aspirations."

However, might such recognition of persons gloss over crucial moral and political distinctions? Could such dialogue reduce moral clarity?

On the contrary, I have found that it is in recognizing that the other side is (sometimes, at least) motivated by a sense of the good that we can more clearly perceive our differences. When we assume that the other side acts with no moral source, our differences seem to be that of good versus evil, or intelligence versus ignorance. This can obscure understanding of what values and goods are at stake. Recognition of another's sense of the good allows us to see precisely how we differ and then commit more deeply to what we affirm. This may prove reassuring to critics who worry that dialogue can collapse important moral distinctions or weaken commitments.

⁴ Shields, Jon *The democratic virtues of the Christian Right*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

⁵ Sanders, Lynn. "Against deliberation." *Political Theory* 25, no. 3 (1997).

Finally, by understanding why a person's reasons are specific to them, this opens the possibility that they might become reasons for me. Students rarely felt ready to adopt another's reasons directly after a dialogue session. Yet follow-up interviews three years later revealed that these conversations may gain significance over time, depending on when in a person's life the dialogue occurs and on what follows.

For instance, a conservative Christian student, Alice, told me that she had thought of the dialogue often in the intervening years. She has continued to ask herself the question she was asked that day by others: "If you say that you believe this, then why did you vote like that?" In 2017 she was attempting to explain why she had voted for Trump. In October 2020, she was still trying to decide whether to vote for him again. The dialogue was not uniquely responsible for her reluctance to vote for Trump. But the dialogue was, she relayed, the first moment in which she had to give an account of why her reasons were reasons for her. This destabilized her assumptions about her choices and sparked a desire to have reasons that are authentically her own. If someone asks me why I care, believe, and vote as I do, then I am invited to ask myself these questions.

What Educators Can Do

Educators who teach subjects ranging from social studies to English can create the space for such conversation. Learning to evaluate and weigh evidence, as well as to form reasoned arguments, remain crucial skills. But these can be preceded by an emphasis on two areas.

First, students can ask each other questions that reveal the values, beliefs, and concerns that drive their peers' views. Questions that can draw out their peers' sense of what is good, as well as their fears, include, for example:

- What makes that issue so important to you?
- What is an ideal society for you?

- Would that policy help build that society, and if so, how?
- Why is that society ideal for you – what is the good of that kind of society?
- What personal experiences have shaped your opinion on this?
- What scares you about the alternative approach?

Students can also interview other people in their lives, as well as analyze texts using such questions as a guide.

But these questions will only matter if students listen to the answers. Hence, teachers should place as much emphasis on listening as they do on speaking. It is not easy to grade receptivity. We must find ways to evaluate students based on how well they listen, such as by asking them to write or speak about their peers' responses and then asking those peers for feedback on the accuracy of the statements.

Importantly, the aim is not to displace the exchange of reasoned arguments, but rather to cultivate receptivity in response to them. The two pedagogical practices suggested above - asking questions for narrative understanding and checking for active listening - can be built upon lessons on how to evaluate evidence and construct arguments. This can lend itself to teaching students to offer and consider reasons as invitations.⁶ If we understand why a person cares about an issue and sees it as they do, we may be more willing to take their concerns and reasons into account. And if we are asked to explain our own premises, we may also be more likely to ask ourselves the questions that prompt the kind of reflective reasoning at which deliberation has long aimed.

⁶ Laden, Anthony Simon. *Reasoning: A social picture*. Oxford University Press, 2012.