Moving Beyond "Agreeing to Disagree": Honoring Life Narratives with the Tools of Civil Discourse

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By Lisa M. Perhamus, GVSU Faculty

Someone recently asked me, "Do you think that civil discourse is a lost piece of national dialogue?" Given the current political climate, it is tempting to say that, indeed, civil discourse is a lost piece of national dialogue in the U.S. But, I am not sure this statement is true. To say that civil discourse is a lost way of handling conflict seems like a sweeping generalization that misses all of the people and initiatives working successfully through a commitment to civil discourse. One way to navigate polarizing dissension is to remember the many people resisting polarization in multiple ways, spaces, and places. These spaces and places exist in each classroom and are part of the teaching and learning process, whether we are conscious of it or not. In the classroom, it is critical to create ways teachers and students can engage in authentic dialogue with one another to reach new understandings about any given topic. To accomplish this, we must respect multiple perspectives and cultural realities. The tools of civil discourse offer strategies for entering controversial conversations with authenticity in ways that resist oppression and value multiple perspectives.

Civil discourse is not about being polite. Rather, it is about being able to remain authentic and engaged in conversation, even when it gets contentious. We remain engaged for the purpose of enhancing collective understanding of each person's viewpoint and nourishing democratic practices through the teaching process. Genuinely engaging in dialogue with the tools of civil discourse calls teachers and students to value and honor each other's life narratives, for it is through the stories of people's lives that viewpoints develop. If teachers approach a controversial subject matter from a place of curiosity about why a student holds a particular viewpoint rather than a standpoint of "fact checking," each student's personhood is valued and their views can be honored throughout disagreements, debates, and even inaccurate perceptions.

Each individual student and teacher brings their life narratives with them into the classroom space and their narratives collectively weave the experiential knowledge base of the classroom through the teaching and learning process. Just as there is a human story behind every "-ism" (e.g. heterosexism affects everyone, but a student who self-identifies as transgender is affected in particular ways and has life experiences to describe those particular ways), there are experiential knowledges in every classroom that impact the teaching and learning process. If educators approach this reality with a mindset of "experiential knowledge = assets for learning," the teaching and learning process becomes one through which both teachers and students engage as their authentic selves.

The purpose of this article is to catalyze deep thinking about how students' life narratives enter the classroom, making the classroom a living collection of narratives. Toward that end, this article is a reflection of my own teaching experiences with the hope that it will offer support and encouragement to teachers who are interested in grounding their teaching and relationships with students in a context of "life narrative inquiry." It is meaningful to enter dialogue with an understanding that behind people's adherence to particular opinions are their life narratives. This is at the heart of my teaching and research. Words are often the visible, at the surface, representations of more

deeply rooted life experiences that have left strong emotional imprints. Students and teachers can collectively learn how to speak and listen in ways that honor each other's life narratives. Such honoring, I believe, is the crux of civil discourse and where political transformation begins.

My students have taught me—and continue to teach me—about the power of personal narratives in shaping how people relate to one another. There are a few children whose stories I remember…

In my first classroom experience, Josh, a four-year-old boy, invited me to play in the dramatic play area where he proceeded to lie down on a small sofa and yell to me gruffly, "Hey, woman, get me a beer." This is the same young boy who showed me how the dolls in the classroom could be physically intimate.

Maria screamed and physically clung to me when her grandmother came to pick her up. It was my job to reassure Maria as she left with her grandmother, even though I felt her fear in my gut.

Brianne, also four years old, casually told me about the sex her mother had the night before with some man who had a gun.

Jose, an infant I met in a daycare program, could not tolerate any light and screamed incessantly due to the effect of his mother's crack cocaine use.

These are some of the children I met while working in the field of Early Childhood Education.

Stories that stand out from my teaching at the college level include the young man whose parents sent him off to live with an uncle in another country in order to escape poverty and war. In a class discussion about sexuality and female identity, a woman shared her struggles with an eating disorder. Another woman had difficulty getting to class on time because her daughter suffered from clinical depression, and she often couldn't get her out of bed in time for school. When talking about issues of poverty, a young man described his family's years of homelessness. Another man shared that his college advisor suggested he change majors to something more

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appropriate, like physical education—a simultaneous insult and perpetuation of a racist stereotype that young black men are natural athletes.

These are the students in our classrooms, and our classrooms must have space for their stories. I appreciate classroom environments that support and challenge each voice in the room, not because of some humanistic, universal concept of equality and freedom, but because building coalitions for change must respect dialogue, multiplicity, and the experiential. If each of the students I described were to band together to advocate for some type of social change, they would be challenged to respect the particularities of their individual lives in their struggle to be effective. I imagine that the student who left his country to escape poverty and war would not readily understand the woman who struggles to eat as she recovers from her eating disorder. Brianne's memories of her mother having sex with the man who had a gun might influence her initial interactions with Josh if he has not come to view women more respectfully. It is difficult to implement social change when people have differing views of what is "right"—these views are shaped by very different cultural realities.

The arguably intensified argument culture in which we now live urgently calls for us to practice civil discourse skills together. "Recognizing the historic period we're swimming through—and naming the political moment we inhabit—can be a fraught and tricky business, but it's worth some sustained, ongoing effort, for it has real consequences in our lives as well as in the lives of those

who will follow after." (Ayers, 2016, n.p.) One of the most powerful rationales to "move beyond 'agreeing to disagree'" is that so much is at stake. In these tumultuous times of immigration tensions, school choice debates, health care angst, institutionalized racism, increasing social stratification, ecojustice concerns, food injustice, etc. the question of, "what next" is a compelling call to action.

> …the crucial paradox which confronts us here is that…education occurs within a social framework… The paradox of education is…that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. (Baldwin, 1963)

If those of us working with youth in schools now dare to dialogically share and listen, we will collectively "dig deep" into our own narratives to better understand the narratives of societal structures. The infrastructures of neighborhoods—businesses, nonprofit organizations, criminal justice systems, artistic avenues, family units, etc.—all intersect in schools. These realities walk through school doorways with the students, caregivers, and teachers—the lived realities all enter with the people they inhabit. From a human geography perspective, human infrastructure is mutually constitutive of societal infrastructures.

Wearing our "teacher hats", we might say that a teach-

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ing commitment to civil discourse, especially when the discussion with students becomes contentious, can enrich democratic participation among graduating youth (Oulton, et al, 2004; Schwieler & Ekencrantz, 2011). Recalling the work of Grace Lee Boggs, what it means to grow as human beings with one another is the evolution of educational revolution (2012). I propose that this historic

moment calls for a radical love of one another—and that requires us to integrate civil discourse into our everyday practice of teaching and living.

I leave this essay with an offering of how to implement a civil discourse approach to contention in the classroom. When an issue arises that causes disagreement and debate, it is a learning opportunity for all. To keep the debate healthy and constructive, offer students an opportunity to *reflect upon why they think what they think before sharing what they think*. Ask older students to respond privately and individually to the following prompts from the National Conversation Project (Makau & Marty, 2013) with a reflective free-write about the debated issue:

1. What is your personal history with this issue?

2. What are your particular beliefs about this issue? (What is really at the heart of it for you?)

3. Are there any gray areas for you about this issue (aspects about which you have mixed feelings or uncertainty)?

If you are working with younger elementary students, the questions might be translated into something like:

1. What do you know about this issue and who taught you?

2. What do you think about this issue?

3. What are you unsure about?

If you are working in an Early Childhood setting, the students will more likely communicate with you through play and the inquiry prompts might be:

1. Let's play _____ (e.g. "family" if the issue is wanting to disrupt heteronormativity). Sticking with this same example scenario, as the teacher playing with the student you might introduce a same-sex marriage in the family you are role-playing, and then

2. create a play scenario that leaves room for the student to react, and then

3. through the play, scaffold the student's reaction with additional resources about the issue, such as using books, small manipulatives, dramatic play toys, and music.

At each developmental level, the life narrative inquiry approach encourages students to tap into how they think and feel about a given issue; reflect upon where those ideas came from for them; consider different perspectives; and then enter into verbal or play conversation about what everyone in the room is saying/playing, making sure that each voice is valued rather than corrected. Whether in an early childhood setting or a high school setting, circle conversations after the reflective period are an impactful way to generate new, multi-perspective understandings about the issue of contention. The goal of this exercise is self-reflection, sharing, listening, and honoring one another's perspective. Because each viewpoint is valued, each student is valued. In this way, students and teachers can move beyond agreeing to disagree and, rather, enter into conversation with one another with an authenticity that honors each person and values the process of multi-perspective collaboration. Through this process-oriented collaboration, students and teachers can work together to interrupt cycles that oppress and marginalize people and instead create more empowering ways of living and learning together.

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