

# Alternative Settings for Liberal-Conservative Exchange: Examining an Undergraduate Dialogue Course

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## ABSTRACT

Given the polarization of the early 21st century political atmosphere in the U.S., intergroup dialogue has emerged as a unique alternative setting, with intentions of facilitating a more productive and thoughtful citizen engagement. Although cross-partisan dialogue efforts are underway in community contexts, they have been slower to reach academic settings. This paper is an exploratory study of our own liberal-conservative dialogue course at the University of Illinois—the first of its kind, to our knowledge. After describing basic features of the course, we identify themes from student journals and final evaluations suggesting both dialogue benefits and challenges. Finally, we discuss the growing literature around dialogue, questions of its long-term impact, and larger potential barriers to participation in liberal-conservative dialogue, specifically. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

*Key words:* intergroup dialogue; intergroup dynamics; higher education; social liberalism; social conservatism; political communication

In our modern culture, men and women are able to interact with one another in many ways: They can sing, dance or play together with little difficulty, but their ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to them seems invariably to lead to dispute, division and often to violence (Bohm, Factor & Garret, 1991, p.1).

Whatever inherent challenges exist to citizens talking about issues that ‘matter deeply’, there seems to be little doubt that the prevailing polarized atmosphere dictated by media and governmental elites has exacerbated this difficulty significantly (Seyle & Newman, 2006; Hess & Todd, 2009). Where dominant institutions abuse their power, community psychologists have long championed a subtle, but powerful social change strategy: the ‘creation of alternative settings’ (Cherniss & Deegan, 2000)—broadly defined as ‘any

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instance in which two or more people come together in new and sustained relationships to attain stated objectives' (Sarason, 1974, p. 269).

In the case of community political discord, one such alternative setting is intergroup dialogue. As characterized by the *National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD)*, dialogue is 'a process which enables people from all walks of life to talk deeply and personally about some of the major issues and realities dividing them . . . often leading to both personal and collaborative action' (Heierbacher, 2007). Dialogue initiatives have prompted burgeoning practical and scholarly attention spanning fields of philosophy, social work and psychology, to linguistics, computer science and physics (Bohm, 1996; Kühnlein, Hannes, & Zeevat, 2003; Rodenborg & Huynh, 2006). Dialogue has also been used in various settings, including high schools, colleges, workplaces, individual homes and community settings (Heierbacher, 2007; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001; Traubman, 2007).

In the context of socio-political tensions, the *Public Conversations Project* has worked since 1990 to 'promote constructive conversations and relationships among those who have differing values, world views and positions about divisive public issues' (see Herzig & Chasin, 2006). Another organization, *Reuniting America*, has attempted to draw together advisors ranging from the Christian Coalition to MoveOn.org in a broad-based effort to convene a 'transpartisan political re-integration' wherein 'large numbers of Americans across differences may be engaged in the process of authentic, healthy dialogue'—this, in a way, explicitly 'external to the current 'red-blue' political system' (McCormick, 2007).

Although colleges have leveraged dialogue course to address campus tensions (beginning with the University of Michigan in 1988), efforts have primarily centred on issues of race and gender (Khuri, 2004; Thompson, Brett, & Behling, 2001; Trevino, 2001). In 2005, the program coordinator for the *Program on Intergroup Relations (PIR)* at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign chose to expand dialogue courses available to include a 'liberal-conservative' option. Currently in its fourth academic year, that course remains the only one of its kind in the nation of which we are aware.

This paper reviews key lessons from our first three semesters of liberal-conservative dialogue. After summarizing basic aspects of the course, we review themes from student feedback. We conclude by discussing overarching questions and implications of our findings for other initiatives to facilitate exchange among those from divergent political backgrounds.

## KEY ASPECTS OF DIALOGUE COURSES

The liberal-conservative course was developed based on *PIR's* dialogue model, where 20 students attend seven weekly sessions during the last half of a semester. Students from each grade level—freshman through senior—were evenly represented, with a majority taking the class as an elective. Based on applications prior to the course starting, general student information (including political background) informed the selection of a politically diverse class. Although aiming for equal numbers of socially liberal- and conservative-leaning students<sup>1</sup>, conservative students typically remained slightly in the minority. Students also

<sup>1</sup>While 'conservative' and 'liberal' will be used to refer to socially conservative-leaning and socially liberal-leaning through the remainder of the paper, it is important to note that simplistic notions of political identity were problematized throughout the course, with space given to varying degrees of distance from major categorizations and separate identities entirely (socialist, libertarian, etc.).

varied in the extent of past political experience—ranging from political science majors, to those with only vague notions of their stances. A 70/30 gender split in favour of women also held across each semester.

Two co-facilitators were selected to themselves represent different parts of the political spectrum. In addition to modelling respectful exchange, facilitators set the stage for discussion, employ various exercises to support that exchange, and ensure accountability to ground rules. The first class begins with a discussion about dialogue and the collaborative creation of class ground-rules. After completing a series of preparatory exercises, subsequent weeks centre on actual dialogue practice with ‘hot topics’: challenging issues chosen by students to discuss (including abortion, church/state relations, foreign policy, race relations and defining ‘marriage’). Initial and closing minutes are reserved to review key points from the previous session and debrief. Weekly writing assignments in online journal ‘blogs’ are also used as an extension of the class dialogue space.

At the outset, students were invited to select personal goals for their semester dialogue participation. In meetings between sessions, facilitators discussed individual students and the progress of the overall class—laying out a specific plan for the next session to meet specific needs. In addition to group discussion and personal e-mail feedback, facilitators met individually with students at mid-semester, to hear progress reports on their own goals and offer constructive feedback on their participation. Formal grades were based on weekly points for class and journal participation.<sup>2</sup>

## HOW DID STUDENTS EXPERIENCE THE COURSE? EXPLORING DIALOGUE FEEDBACK

To document students’ experience of the course, material from several different sources was reviewed, including journals, in-class comments, e-mails and final evaluations. Open-ended surveys during the final session asked: *What did you like best about the class? What did you like least about the class? What is the most significant thing you learned in this class? Did this class impact your own political identity? If so, how? Did this class impact your view of those with differing political identities? If so, how?* Ultimately, permission was obtained from 48/50 enrolled students to draw on journals and final evaluations as part of the research project, with two consenting to evaluations only. In addition, we asked feedback from students who dropped the course (4 during the semester, 5 prior to its beginning).

All text was reviewed by the primary author to identify comments reflecting on course outcomes. In order to convey an accurate picture of the course, equal attention was given to both positive and negative feedback. These comments were consequently sorted in an attempt to identify meaningful patterns and themes. Given both the scale of the dataset (~220 pages of journal text) and the impossibility of matching up journal text with final evaluations (while still preserving anonymity), specificity of analysis did not reach the individual level. As a result, rather than quantifying these patterns, our study remained exploratory and qualitative. Student comments that follow are presented verbatim, except where minor changes served the purposes of space or clarity.

<sup>2</sup>The impact of varied grading systems on the dialogue process is an issue deserving additional careful attention.

*Dialogue feedback: Positive themes*

In terms of beneficial attributions to the course, the following themes emerged: (1) discovering a 'new' way to talk; (2) seeing others in a new way and (3) seeing oneself more clearly.

*Discovering a 'new' way to talk.* This theme captures diverse remarks on having discovered a mode of conversation previously unknown, including not fighting, exploring uncertain thoughts, and authentically sharing and listening. In general, several students commented on the novelty of a space dedicated to open exchange—'it was like nothing I have experienced before'; '[I learned] that it is possible to talk about politically relevant issues without being antagonistic or attacking'; 'Our class last week was a very first for me. It was maybe the second time I saw people discuss gay marriage in a respectful way'.

Some spoke specifically of learning to 'take stances', 'share my beliefs' and 'articulate my thoughts' in a public forum, with one student describing a 'defining moment where I was able . . . to independently voice my opinion'.

For one student quite accustomed to sharing, the allowance of uncertainty that was striking—'I could not believe . . . that others shared that they were confused by things (something that I am not used to, being a political science major in which if you do not know you pretend to know). Others commented on an atmosphere 'safe enough to explore beliefs and values'—even to 'question important beliefs' and explore 'difficult or taboo topics'/'issues I normally would not talk about.'

Excitement in a safe sharing space was accompanied by interest in hearing from diverse perspectives—'What I liked the most about this class was the idea that we, as people, should try and understand the different opinions of others'. Many hinted at changing in this regard, with an overriding theme of positive evaluations being that students had 'opened to hearing more of the opposing side' and learned to listen more authentically: '[At the end of the dialogue], I listen to people instead of just hearing them'. '[I learned] to listen to what others were saying . . . to really try my hardest to understand why others felt the way they did':

- I just like the fact that I listened like that for once . . . I guess I never realized what you miss out on when you just keep getting defensive and putting your opinions out there when so many other people have valuable things to say.
- I did my best to really listen to the person who was sharing and hear their words and their emotions . . . to hold back and really try to listen to others as they share. . . This is still not natural for me. I often find myself drifting off in my head to formulate a response, but I think by actively trying to go against this, I am getting better at really listening.

Students also reported changes in their ability to 'sit with my discomfort' when listening to hard-to-hear viewpoints and growing in capacity to ask sincere questions of each other.

*Seeing others in a new way.* Comments also reflected specific interpersonal and personal insights associated with the dialogue, including seeing both oneself (*Theme #3*) and others (*Theme #2*) in different ways.

Based on early journals, initial student perceptions of the opposing political camp were sometimes harsh and stereotypical, with conservatives, for instance, described in student journals as variously 'uneducated, fanatically religious'; tending to 'impose religious values on the lives of others'; 'when they disagree or agree about something, they really do not have a reason' and 'it is just because that is what they were taught when they were younger'. One student admitted, 'I really judge people negatively when it comes to being socially

conservative, which is why I need the class!’ Liberals, on the other hand, were initially described as ‘more caught up in current events and opinions . . . easily swayed with the times’; ‘open to new ideas or lifestyles which many may find to be immoral or wrong’; ‘destroying what the American society was based on’; ‘not religious’ and ‘people with no values’.

Clearly, not everyone who began with such views experienced a shift. In response to ‘what you liked least about the class’ one liberal student wrote, ‘Conservatives (sorry, but it is true). For some things, I’m still baffled by conservative thought’. When asked whether the class had impacted their views of others, some denied any change: ‘Not really, because I had a fairly well formed view of the differing political side and this to some extent reinforced that view’. For many students, however, original views changed considerably.

Although statistics were not available for one semester, when asked, ‘*Did you learn to value new viewpoints because of this course?*’ 79% (22/28) students in two sessions indicated ‘Yes or definitely yes’. Journal comments after the ‘beginning of life’ dialogue illustrate. On one hand, conservative students mentioned realizing ‘that because someone is pro choice, does not mean they support abortion’ and gaining ‘a much better understanding about abortion because of the personal stories that were told’. A liberal student, on the other hand, noted ‘I gained a new understanding about the fear that pro-lifers have that abortion is allowing people to be irresponsible. I had never thought about it in that way’.

Similarly, following the marriage and sexuality dialogue, a conservative student commented, ‘I thought it was valuable to gain a better understanding of the defense of same sex marriage . . . I have never had the opportunity to sit down and hear the heart-felt opinions and beliefs of someone from the LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender] community’. In the same dialogue, several liberal students reported learning ‘why the conservatives did not feel LGBT marriage should be legalized’ and ‘how important religion can be’ for some—‘I never thought of religion shaping someone’s entire life’.

Perhaps the most significant impact of dialogue observed across students was its common effect of humanizing the ‘other’: ‘[Dialogue] made me more open to fears and concerns of [the] counter-group’; ‘it made me respect them more’; ‘It made me see them as a person and not just a view’; ‘Yeah, I actually can understand why conservatives have their views. I couldn’t understand [before] why they felt this way’. In being asked the most significant thing learned in the course, one person quipped, ‘conservatives aren’t just ‘conservatives’, they’re people’. Another noted:

Before this class, I went through the logic of conservatives and would think, ‘They have to be *crazy!*’ From this experience, it’s great to know half of the world is *not nuts*. You don’t get this on TV—they’re goofy on both sides there. But from this class, I better understand now the conservative logic; I may not agree, but it makes more sense.

By our own observations, it appeared that conservative students generally came to experience liberal classmates as something more than ‘evil’ or ‘amoral’ and liberal students generally experienced conservative classmates as something more than ‘ignorant’ or ‘narrow’. Indeed, one of the most significant reported shifts was simply becoming more attuned to sincere intentions and good desires underlying distinct perspectives: ‘I have a lot more respect for the other side and their sincere intentions of good’. ‘The most significant thing I have learned is to look past the label of liberal or conservative and realize we are all human beings with good intentions to better ourselves and the world’; ‘I have had to be forced to listen to other people’s viewpoints, and in listening, I have learned that they are not bad people, they just bump heads with me on certain topics, and like my opinion deserves to be heard, so does theirs’.

Another part of this ‘humanizing’ was discovering more extensive commonalities than previously anticipated—‘I learned that I am not so different from those that don’t have the same views’; ‘[I] found more common ground than expected’. A greater appreciation of complexity also appeared to contribute to a sense of commonality for some: ‘not everyone fits the right/left stereotype. Most people are more moderate and unsure even though they pick a side, so I should not judge someone or stereotype them based on their side’.

At the same time, it is important to qualify that better appreciation of common views and desires did not imply either simple reconciliation or a dramatic conversion (both common misinterpretations of dialogue). As students themselves clarified, ‘I now understand far-right and far-left point of views a lot more. I don’t agree with them, but I can *understand*’; ‘while I may not agree with such people, I understand why they might feel as they do’. *Seeing oneself more clearly.* In addition to deeper understanding of others, when asked, ‘*Did this course help you understand yourself better?*’ 79% (22/28) students in two classes also indicated ‘Yes or Definitely yes’.

While some reported little change in self-understanding, others indicated the course had helped them ‘learn more about’, ‘shape’, ‘define’ and ‘formulate’ their own views. The class also helped individuals ‘pick a stance’ and clarify their political identity by learning ‘exactly [what] being a liberal or conservative means’. One student noted, ‘before I didn’t really have an identity. Now I feel like I do’.

In contrast to forming or creating a political identity, the largest number of students felt the class had further ‘reaffirmed’, ‘expanded’ or ‘solidified’ an identity that was pre-existing in some form, with reports of increased knowledge as to ‘why I believe what I believe’ across the political spectrum. For example, one student stated ‘it showed me my passions—I knew my views but it helped me see what I care about the most’. Others asserted, ‘It gave me more knowledge to back my views’. ‘I was very in-between in the beginning, but as I explored new things I began to find myself’.

Still others found the class an opportunity to discern the reasons for their political group membership, or serve as a venue to critically reflect on that identity. One student noted, ‘It made me realize why I am a liberal. I always knew I was a liberal due to how I felt on certain issues. However, I did not know how I came to have these views’. Another reflected on being challenged in that pre-existing identity; ‘sometimes you are raised to be one thing, but as you explore it, you come to learn that maybe that side is not the right fit for you’. Still others found the dialogue had made their thinking about personal political identities more complex: ‘Now I question if I do really have a strong 100% political identity’; ‘Some issues I thought I was entirely settled on, but I now question’.

In summary, positive evaluations of dialogue ranged from the opportunity to gain exposure and practice in a new way of talking, to consequences of that engagement for both understanding oneself and others.

### *Dialogue feedback: Negative themes*

Students also identified concerns when asked what they liked least about the course. Several students in each semester reported feeling the course was too brief—‘not enough time to fully develop ideas’. Others disliked the amount of preparation time prior to actual dialogue, wishing the class would have moved into ‘hot topics’ more quickly.

Laying aside logistics, the majority of concerns centred on deeper aspects of the dialogue experience. In spite of facilitator efforts to create a supportive atmosphere,

some students had difficult personal experiences in the class—reflected in the following three themes: (1) discomfort in listening; (2) discomfort in sharing and (3) general process concerns.

*Discomfort in listening.* In contrast to positive encounters reviewed earlier, some students commented on persisting difficulty listening to those who held views divergent from their own. Following the gay marriage dialogue, one student noted, ‘My initial internal thought[s] to most comments . . . [were] disgust and anger’. Referring to the same session, another student said:

What came out of our dialogue last week was, sadly, mainly negative things for me. It was very hard for me to sit there and listen . . . to the claims made by many people. This is an issue I know I am not flexible on, and I take personal offense to many things that are said that contrast [with] how I feel. I left class last week angry, upset, and hurt.

Other students experienced similar discomfort at different times. Several African-American and Latino students who identified as conservative, in particular, felt significant tension from liberal classmates. Referring to comments made by another black classmate, one student wrote, ‘I didn’t necessarily like the inference that because I was conservative and black that I just didn’t know my views. . . . The hardest for me to hear are that black conservatives . . . are traitors’.

Beyond group-level concerns, others spoke of difficulty in participating with certain individuals: ‘It is clear to me that some people have stronger debate/political . . . backgrounds than others. . . . What bothers me is that it seems as though some people use this . . .to intimidate others or to ‘win’ the conversation’. Similarly, other comments about classmates ‘dominating’ the dialogue—‘going on for a long time’, ‘hogging the floor’ and interrupting indicated concerns about having equitable opportunities to participate in the dialogue. Still other students commented that sometimes the pace of the discussion was too fast, exemplified by one student’s experience: ‘It’s really hard to ask someone a question before someone else starts talking. I think of questions to ask, but by the time it is my turn to talk, the topic has moved on’.

The rapid pace might also have affected the depth of understanding, illustrated by another student’s reflection, ‘I heard many questions asked, but never answered. We were too concerned with getting our opinion across to everyone else that we never stopped to actually listen to what another person was asking’. Listening and understanding was also hampered at times for some students by other barriers, including an overriding need to talk, or being overwhelmed by the number of perspectives being shared. One student pointed out, ‘Too often, we just [do not] hear because we are too busy thinking about what we want to say’; ‘When there are so many opinions being express[ed], it’s hard to take it all in to process . . . . Sometimes I will find my mind drifting off somewhere else’. One student acknowledged a willingness to share freely among classmates, but proposed a broad lack of thought or interest in truly understanding each other:

I felt that many of us did not have the true underlying priority of ‘authentic exploration’; instead, many of us were trying to state our positions with the hopes of either convincing others or just ‘saying what we had to say’ and not taking to heart what others had to say.

*Discomfort in sharing.* In addition to barriers with listening, students also reflected on challenges they faced in sharing their views. Some expressed concern that comments were taken ‘too literal’. with others acting ‘very defensive’ and ‘closed-minded’—with judgments sometimes based on cues such as facial expressions or the ‘tone of people’s voices when they didn’t like what the opposing side was saying’. Different dynamics

occurred from session to session, with one student remarking, 'Our previous dialogue . . . was too nice. This time though, it was a bit too confrontational. If we could be in the middle of that, then we'll be just fine'.

*General process concerns: The challenge of facilitation.* As difficulties arose, facilitators would generally respond with reminders about ground-rules. In some cases, they would intervene to check aggressive individuals, and/or directly prompt those less inclined to speak—'Why don't we hear from those who haven't had a chance to speak yet?'

By and large, facilitation itself proved to be an unremitting and humbling challenge. The extent to which facilitator views should be shared, for instance, elicited diverse feedback. One student remarked, 'I like that [facilitators] shared some of their viewpoints and integrated it in the discussion. It helped me understand better'. In contrast, another said 'I think [facilitators] talked too much. They always said they would stay out of the conversation but did not'.

This reflects the moment-by-moment challenge of knowing when to intervene—'Do we correct this student now? Do we pause to clarify the nature of dialogue? Do we let this one go?' While some situations called for more intervention and direct facilitation, others necessitated stepping back and letting students engage more freely—i.e. 'taking off the training wheels'. For instance, after sensing an over-reliance on facilitator input during one session, we instituted a 'facilitator gag-rule' for the remainder of the session and found it prompting more student sharing.

The difficulty of knowing when to offer more or less assistance became especially salient one semester. After hostile comments from one student early in the course, facilitators intervened to emphasize the importance of respecting each other and not offending. Over subsequent weeks, students seemed primarily focused on *not saying anything* that might offend, eventually becoming clear that our intervention had unfortunately been broadly interpreted to mean that dialogue essentially meant 'not debating'. In subsequent semesters, this experience prompted greater care to intervene selectively and in less reactive ways.

In summary, concerns with dialogue ranged from personal discomfort in listening and sharing with classmates, to general concerns with facilitator interventions within the dialogue.

## DISCUSSION

In the foregoing, we have reported both positive and negative themes of feedback. Final quantitative surveys of two classes confirm roughly two-thirds of students satisfied with the course, with a third dissatisfied in some way. In addition to dialogue challenges depicted above, such diversity in response may also reflect distinct levels of student preparation and readiness, as noted in other dialogue course reviews (Khuri, 2004).

The reported changes in perceptions of self and others are consistent with other research documenting the proximal impact of intergroup dialogue, including studies documenting increased comfort, connection/friendship and understanding across different identities (Yeakley, 1999); changed perceptions of self and society (Alimo, Kelly, & Clark, 2002); enhanced self-awareness, perspective-taking ability, ease in communicating across differences and interest in bridging them (Nagda, 2003; Deturk, 2004). That cross-political dialogues could have tangible results should perhaps not be surprising given the documented impact of dialogue across interfaith exchange (Takim, 2004; Tyler, Valek, & Rowland, 2005) and ethno-political conflicts in Northern Ireland (Knox & Hughes, 1996; Porter, 2000) and the Middle East (Abu-Nimer, 2004; Mollov & Lavie, 2001).



*Short-term versus long-term change ensuing from dialogue*

The degree to which immediate positive (or negative) outcomes imply any lasting consequence, however, is unclear. Obviously, a more permanent setting such as Jewish–Arab ‘living room dialogues’ between neighbours (Traubman, 2007), would make long-term changes more likely. For any seven-week dialogue course, it seems crucial to maintain realistic expectations. Even so, we would propose that growth and insights occurring within even a short-term, bounded setting may not only be retained in future engagements, but also potentially spur continued improvement outside of the formal dialogue context. This was the experience of the first author, for instance, who experienced dramatic changes prompted by his ‘first exposure’ to the practice of dialogue. While further research is needed on a long-term impact of dialogue, to the extent that students experience proximal changes described above, it seems reasonable the experience could similarly prompt a changed ‘trajectory’ into the future.

More difficult dialogue experiences deserve longer-term evaluation as well. While immediate participant discomfort should always be taken seriously, it may be helpful to remember that a degree of stretching may be justified within an intergroup dialogue setting. One conservative student, for instance, felt particularly ‘pushed out of her comfort zone’ by the class experience, reporting later that she had gone home and cried after the gay marriage dialogue. Although acknowledging in final evaluations that she had ‘gained a lot,’ she also insisted that she would ‘never do it again in the future.’ One semester later, however, this same student decided to enter training to become a dialogue facilitator herself.

*Barriers for liberal/conservative participation*

Beyond the immediate benefits or challenges of intergroup dialogue across the partisan divide, this exploration also alerted us to some larger questions about the aims of dialogue in a political context. From our own observations, as well as those of the director of the *National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation* (S. Heierbacher, personal communication, August 3, 2006), it seems clear that conservative-leaning citizens are significantly less likely to engage in dialogue settings. Among the potential reasons for this resistance (Hess & Todd, 2009), one likely contributor is the tendency among conservatives to be suspicious of practices promoting fundamental questioning and/or change. From this view, dialogue may be perceived as part of a broader ‘liberal agenda’. Although surely exaggerated, this fear is also certainly not without cause, given abundant discussion of dialogue as a kind of ‘educational tool’ used to ‘promote diversity, social justice and social change’ (see Alimo et al., 2002; Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006; Gurin & Nagda, 2006; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001).

Concerns about hidden agendas, to be clear, are not exclusive to conservatives. From liberal circles, dialogue and deliberation have likewise been critiqued as potentially reinforcing status quo norms and structures in subtle ways (Burbules, 2000; Sanders, 1997). From this view, a simple invitation to ‘talk’ might be seen as an attempt to placate, subvert action or muffle dissent. Accordingly, on both ends of the political spectrum, serious concerns with dialogue are evident.

While adequate consideration of these concerns requires a more extensive exploration than here possible, for purposes of this paper, a basic starting point might be broached. Namely, genuine dialogue must entail the *bilateral*, free and un-manipulated engagement

of at least *two* persons, *two* unique perspectives and ultimately *two* distinct agendas. The moment a space becomes, in actuality, a site for unilateral, instrumental and manipulated engagement, it arguably *ceases to be* 'dialogue'. As Paulo Freire (1970) said, 'Dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's 'depositing' ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the discussants' (p. 70).

It is the importance of such ideals that highlights the crucial role of quality facilitation and supervision in promoting and enforcing them. In response to similar concerns in the context of deliberation practice, Kadlec and Friedman (2007) emphasize 'careful control and design' of the conversation setting—ensuring, for instance, that 'no single entity with a stake in the substantive outcome of the deliberation should be the main designer or guarantor of the process' (p. 7). A good partnership of liberal and conservative facilitators will provide an important check on the degree to which participants try to 'use' the dialogue space to advance their own agenda. Ultimately, facilitators may thus cultivate 'strong sense' or 'fair-minded' critical thinking of all perspectives being presented (Browne & Keeley, 2001; Paul & Elder, 2002), rather than only those perspectives that facilitators believe are incorrect.

In sum, tangible consequences for both individuals and communities arguably flow from the health of our civil discourse—even, our 'ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to [us]' (Bohm, Factor, & Garrett, 1991, p.1). To the growing dialogue movement, we add our own study results, confirming several benefits of expanding liberal-conservative intergroup dialogue in general, and cross-political initiatives among university students, in particular. Given the prevailing political atmosphere, we propose dialogue as both an 'alternative setting' for exploring difficult issues and a literal 'intervention' into long-standing resentments and misunderstanding between communities, on and off campus.

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