Bridging Divides

By Megan Chabalowski

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"Change happens by listening and then starting a dialogue with the people who are doing something you don't think is right."

- Jane Goodall

"The dividing line between the young Tunisians was evident as they gathered to attempt a dialogue between their university's two rival student unions, groups tied to the country's main political parties. On the right side of the room sat the Islamists, whose politics are closely bound to their religion. On the left were the secularists, adherents of an array of left-leaning ideologies." [1]

Tunisia, a country located at the uppermost tip of Africa, tucked between Libya and Algeria, has worked hard to overcome factions of violent extremism and build a functioning democracy after overthrowing a dictator in a largely nonviolent 2011 revolution. While Islamists and secularists have agreed to share political power in the new government, their democracy remains fragile, as deeply embedded distrust between political groups threatens the stability of the fledgling government.

This is the tense climate in which two student unions representing opposing political groups at the University of Manouba, near Tunis, agreed to meet in 2016 to talk across political divides.

1. Strasser, Fred. "Tunisian Student Unions Bridge Islamist, Secular Divide." United States Institute of Peace, September 2017. https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/09/tunisian-student-unions-bridge-islamist-secular-divide.

Led by a U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) trained facilitator and USIP staff, they participated in dialogue and conflict-resolution training over the course of five days. While there remained a lack of trust between the groups, they "managed to build bridges and reach a consensus of sorts: They agreed to continue exploring concrete actions they could take to ease their conflicts." [2]

The conversation that took place between these groups is an example of how, with the right training, facilitation, and support, young people from deeply divided communities can have difficult conversations that are civil and productive.

It is important to note that civil does not necessarily mean unconflicted. The Tunisian students entered the dialogue with perspectives that often clashed and did not conclude the conversation in agreement on every issue. Instead, they emerged with a new understanding of each other's perspectives and their own, and with a plan for how to take action on issues they identified of mutual interest.

One year later, communication between the student unions remains civil, and they have implemented a code of conduct to guide cross-union collaboration.

This is a powerful example of how dialogue, accompanied by conflict management skills training, can be used to guide civil discourse in tense times. The U.S. Institute of Peace, a national institution dedicated to the proposition that a world without violent conflict is possible, practical, and essential, uses dialogue to resolve conflicts in some of the world's more dangerous conflict zones.

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Dialogue, as a formal process and as an approach, is equally relevant in the U.S. classroom. It can help students have difficult conversations on divisive topics, particularly when there are personal connections or implications, and can help them devise a plan for taking action on issues of mutual concern.

What is Dialogue? (And What is it Not?)

The term "dialogue" is used broadly and loosely. In an everyday setting, it often means having a conversation. Teachers might use the term when thinking about how to encourage students to speak up in class.

In USIP's work, we define dialogue as "a facilitated, conflict-intervention process

2. Strasser, Fred. "Tunisian Student Unions Bridge Islamist, Secular Divide." United States Institute of Peace, September 2017. https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/09/tunisian-student-unions-bridge-islamist-secular-divide.

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that brings together various stakeholders in a conflict or around a problem or concern, to express, listen to, explore, and better understand diverse views in order to transform individual, relational, or structural drivers of conflict."[3] In this definition, dialogue is a formal process used for peacebuilding purposes. A school or teacher could organize a formal dialogue, using trained facilitators, to raise and address issues of conflict among students or in their community.

"A dialogic approach seeks to uncover and explore multiple perspectives so as to improve one's own understanding."

However, dialogue can also be an approach. It can be defined more simply as "a conversation or exchange of ideas that seeks mutual understanding through the sharing of perspectives."[4] A teacher may take a dialogic approach when leading a classroom discussion. To understand what dialogue means in this context, it can help to compare it to a different form of communication often found in classrooms: debate.

Where dialogue is collaborative (two or more sides working together toward common understanding)[5], debate is oppositional (two sides opposing each other and attempting to prove each other wrong). In dialogue, the goal is to find common ground; in debate, it is to win.

A dialogic approach seeks to uncover and explore multiple perspectives so as to improve one's own understanding. It teaches and uses conflict management and peacebuilding skills of conflict analysis, active listening, mediation, and negotiation to guide and support a fruitful conversation around difficult topics. It may lead to action around common interests that arise, or it may serve solely to identify those interests, depending on the desired outcome.

In today's world of deep divides that seem at best dangerous to approach and at worst, impossible to bridge, dialogue can help begin those difficult conversations and lead to improved mutual understanding.

Dialogue in Action in the Classroom

Colorado middle school teacher and 2015 USIP Peace Teacher Andy Blair wanted to use dialogue to "break down social walls constructed between students and pro-

3. Froude, Jack, and Michael Zanchelli. "What Works in Facilitated Dialogue Projects." United States Institute of Peace, July 2017. https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/07/what-works-facilitated-dialogue-projects.

4. Snodderly, Dan, editor. "USIP "Peace Terms" Glossary." United States Institute of Peace, 2011. https://www.usip.org/ publications/usip-peace-terms-glossary.

5. Note that this does not mean agreement. The goal is to understand each other's perspective, not necessarily agree.

vide a safe place for them to be honest."[6] He designed a lesson plan that would show students the value of listening and asking meaningful questions, and that would set the stage for subsequent conversations about critical global issues.

Sitting in a circle, with chairs on the inner circle facing out and chairs in the outer circle facing in, students were given a se- ries of questions to answer in pairs sitting across from each other. They each had 60 seconds to speak, while their partner lis- tened carefully. When one storyteller fin- ished they switched roles. The students ro- tated chairs in between questions to give them the opportunity to listen and share with different people.

As the students became more comfortable with sharing, the questions got more personal and difficult. For example, opening questions included "How have you helped someone?" and "What is your favorite family tradition?" They then progressed to "When have you been treated unfairly, and did anyone ever stand up for you?" and "Have you ever avoided an issue, what was the issue, and why did you avoid it?" Andy carefully designed questions that were appropriate for his students, based on his knowledge of them.

This lesson allowed Andy to demonstrate that his classroom was a safe space where students could share different perspectives around difficult questions. It introduced them to the importance of multiple per- spectives and active listening, a conflict management skill Andy sought to develop in his students over the course of the year. And it set the stage for Andy's class to tackle challenging subjects facing the world and their community.

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"By the end of the school year, I could actually see [my students] in class discussions genuinely listening to each other, trying to understand a different perspective than their own," Andy said.

Classroom Resources for Educators

Whether employed as a formal process to bridge differences between student unions at a university in Tunisia or as an approach

6. Learn more about the USIP Peace Teachers Program at www.usip.org/public-education/peace-teachers, and find Andy's lesson plan in "2015 Peace Teachers Program: New Resources for the Classroom" at https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-01/2015-2016%20USIP%20Peace%20Teacher%20Cohort%20Resources_0.pd

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to having difficult conversations at a mid- dle school in Colorado, dialogue is key to keeping discourse civil and productive. There are resources from USIP and others to help educators prepare to integrate dialogue and other conflict management skills into their classrooms.

• For more information on dialogue:

To learn more about dialogue as an approach, teacher Andy Blair recommends that educators familiarize themselves with USIP's handout on "Dialogue versus Debate"[7] prior to leading his lesson. For more guidance on dialogue as a formal process, there are a number of places to turn, including USIP's experience using dialogue in con- flict zones, international institutes that have studied democratic dialogue, and national organizations that provide dialogue training and resources.[8]

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• For more information on conflict management skills:

USIP's *Peacebuilding Toolkit for Educators* contains interactive lessons that focus on the skills of conflict management, includ- ing conflict analysis, active listening, negotiation, and mediation.[9] Each of these skills provides students with the tools they need to effectively engage in dialogue around difficult topics. More about these skills can be found in my article, "Rethinking Conflict to Prevent Violence and Build Peace" in the Win- ter 2017 CSEE Journal on Conflict Resolution.

• For more information on integrating these concepts and skills into your classroom:

USIP's Peace Teachers developed lessons and strategies that demonstrate how the

7. "Dialogue versus Debate." Global Campus at the United States Institute of Peace, 2015. https://www.usip.org/sites/ default/files/2017-01/Dialogue%2Bvs%2BDebate%2B-%2BUSIP%2BGlobal%2BCampus.pdf.

8. USIP offers a number of useful examples and studies of successful dialogues on its website, www.usip.org. Two help- ful guides on designing dialogues include "Democratic Dialogue: A Handbook for Practitioners," Pruitt, Bettye, and Philip Thomas. Canadian International Development Agency, International IDEA, Organization of American States, and United Nations Development Programme, 2007. http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/crisis%20prevention/demo- cratic%20_dialogue.pdf, and "Fostering Conversations Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversa- tions Project," Herzig, Maggie and Laura Chasin. Public Conversations Project, 2006.

9. Milofsky, Alison, editor. Peacebuilding Toolkit for Educators. United States Institute of Peace, 2011. https://www.usip. org/public-education/educators/peacebuilding-toolkit-educators.

Peacebuilding Toolkit for Educators and other peacebuilding approaches, including dialogue, can be integrated into existing social studies and ELA curriculum.[10]

Walk the Talk: A Call to Peacebuilding Action

In our work with teachers and students, we regularly hear that current global events and discourse have students feeling disempowered, divided, and hopeless. In these difficult moments, it is important to focus, in the words of teacher Andy Blair, on the "end goal":

"Our culture understands that our education system must teach STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) to pre- pare students for future occupations. We need that same focus and determination in teaching peace. If we want a more peaceful future, we must equip the future generation with the skills required to build peace. MTV recently named the next generation "The Founders." This is because our students will be tasked with being the founders of a new world. Technologically they will solve problems surrounding energy, space exploration, and healthcare. When it comes to peace, they will have to solve problems surrounding the rule of law, violent extremism, and post-conflict reconstruction. We have a duty to equip The Founders with the skills necessary to build a more peaceful world."[11]

"'If we want a more peaceful future, we must equip the future generation with the skills required to build peace.'"

Dialogue and other conflict management skills prepare students to engage with those with whom they disagree, so that, together, they can change the world. ●

10. "New Resources for the Classroom." USIP Peace Teachers Program. www.usip.org/public-education/peace-teachers.

11. Blair, Andy. "Focusing on "the End": Equipping Students to be Peacebuilders." United States Institute of Peace, 2015. https://www.usip.org/public-education/educators/focusing-end-equipping-students-be-peacebuilders-usip-peace- teacher-andy-blair.

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Parent Tips: Civility

by Julie Stevens

Incivility isn't just unremarkable—it's considered marketable and entertaining," notes Kent Weeks, professor at the Peabody School of Education at Vanderbilt and advisor to college administrators. Furthermore, we no longer share a common understanding of what behavior towards others is simply unacceptable. Our children can access more ways to communicate and connect than ever before, but are increasingly self-absorbed, leading to higher rates of anxiety and depression. Thus, while young people report a greater desire to help others than past generations, they are less able to help themselves.

Consider the following ways parents can counteract the toxic selfishness at the heart of incivility:

- Basic as it sounds, there's no underestimating the importance (and often the challenge) of **modeling and helping your kids practice good manners.** Considerate, respectful "pleases" and "thank yous" are indeed magic words. But it's worth reflecting on the fact that the Latin root *manuerius* means "of the hand." Manners are about gently handling the sometimes fragile feelings of family, friends, and even strangers. **Establish for your kids the connection between rituals of common courtesy and deeply caring for the well- being of others.**

- Despite some of our political leaders' frequent reliance on this basic bullying tactic, **insist that your home be a "no name calling" zone.** Help your kids distinguish between the behavior (such as a classmate lacking effective social skills) and abusive labels ("he's such a loser" "she's just a weirdo"). If your child calls you a name, refuse to take it too personally, and model an appropriate response: "First, it's never okay to use that rude language. But I can tell you're really upset. Please try to explain to me what's bothering you…"

- **Be vigilant in helping your kids manage the lynch mob mentality that pervades social media.** Anonymity breeds incivility. Remind your kids of the incredible potential for good and ill at their fingertips. Help them moderate the tendency for instantaneous communication that results in permanent hurt. Explain that restraint is the art of feeling good later.

- In conversations with your kids, practice active listening and ask clarifying questions while encouraging your child to choose careful, precise language to express with accuracy her point of view. **Embrace the possibility of discussing with civility those topics where you and your kids experience conflict, helping each other distinguish between dialogue and debate.** Work together to develop a "code of conduct" that allows for such honest discussions while respecting differing perspectives.

- **Use reading stories, looking at evocative photos, even watching TV dramas with your kids as a time to nurture the empathy for those who are different from us. Civil society depends upon this capacity for empathy.** P.M. Forni, co-founder of the Johns Hopkins Civility Project says in *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct,* St. Martin's Griffin 2002, "Reading literature can develop the kind of imagination without which civility is impossible. To be fully human we must be able to imagine others' hurt and to relate it to the hurt we would experience if we were in their place. Consideration is imagination on a moral track."

Julie Stevens is a parent, former school psychologist and independent school teacher. She has written numerous articles on parenting and moral growth, which can be found on csee.org.