

Steps

to

Healing Polarization in the Classroom

Insights and Examples

Amy Uelmen and Michael Kessler

In a time when discussion and conversation often feel irretrievably fractious, Uelmen and Kessler offer a hopeful and practical methodology for developing deep, shared understandings between people. Importantly, their methodology embraces the fact that a pluralistic world thrives on differing views and posits that the goal is not to resolve differences, but to find connections among those differences. Uelmen and Kessler potently use their own teaching experiences and the words of their students to guide us in how to transform anxieties about how we are perceived by, and relate to, others into a steadfastness about the positive possibilities of engaging. While Uelmen and Kessler speak most directly to those working with millennials, their advice and five-step methodology can be embraced by all of us.

Deborah J. Cantrell

*Associate Professor & Director,
Clinical Education Program
University of Colorado Law School*

Five Steps To Healing Polarization in the Classroom



5 Steps

About the 5 Steps Series

The books in the 5 Steps Series are useful for anyone seeking bridge-building solutions to current issues. The 5 Steps series presents positive approaches for engaging with the problems that open up gaps and divisions in family, school, church, and society. Each volume presents five short chapters (or “steps”) on a single topic. Each chapter includes a relevant “excerpt”, “insights” from the author(s), and an “example” to consider. The “example” is a real-life story that illustrates how each step can be applied in daily life.

Five Steps To Healing Polarization in the Classroom

Insights and Examples

Amy Uelmen

Michael Kessler



New City Press

Hyde Park, New York

Published in the United States by New City Press
202 Comforter Blvd.,
Hyde Park, NY 12538
www.newcitypress.com
©2018 Amelia Uelmen/Michael Kessler

Cover design by Leandro de Leon

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017963159
5 steps to healing polarization in the classroom / by Amy
Uelmen and Michael Kessler.

ISBN 978-1-56548-629-4 (paper)
ISBN 978-1-56548-630-0 (e-book)

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

Introduction	9
--------------------	---

Step 1

Prioritize Reflective Over Reactive Habits of Mind	17
In students' words: The value of reflection.....	22

Step 2

Discern Potential Conversational Connections With Other Colleagues.....	25
In students' words: The value of a pre-circulated agenda	29

Step 3

Be Fully Present and Engaged in the Seminar Discussion	33
Unplug from distractions due to technology.....	34
Get everyone to unplug	36
In students' words: The value of banning laptops	37

Step 4

Both Professors and Students Promote Full Participation by All Members of the Class	43
Every student speaks every class	43
Small group discussions to hone the art of listening	44
In students' words: the value of small group discussions	47

Step 5

Learn to Lean into Disagreement and Conflict	51
In students' words: The value of leaning into disagreement.....	53
Accompaniment	57
The inter-play of private and public space	57
Questions of scale: Larger settings, fewer resources.....	60
Appendix	63
Exercise: "Listening to Understand"	63
Exercise: "What is at Stake for You?"	65
Communication Tool: The SOS Card	66
Notes	67

Introduction

A relational response to polarization

Recent studies indicate a dramatic increase in the partisan divide on political values.¹ It is not a stretch to conclude that faculty and students alike are bringing these divisions into the college and graduate school classroom.² Some pedagogical responses to these tensions focus on creating “safe space” for students whose perspectives have been marginalized or silenced due to the subtle or not-so-subtle dynamics of privilege and power. Other educators have critiqued these efforts. We believe that teachers at all levels of education have much to learn by reflecting on these debates, both to gain awareness of their own areas of implicit or explicit bias, and to develop increasingly fine-tuned sensitivities to the challenges that their students from varying backgrounds may face.

However, these questions are not the focus of this book. Instead, we begin with a question: why are millennials—students born in the early 1980s to about 2000—generally reluctant or fearful to discuss their deep differences in a classroom setting? We posit that

the key to healing polarization in today's classroom lies in recognizing what lies at the root of this fear: this generation's heightened sensitivity to relationships with their peers. When our pedagogical practices address the frailties and build on the strengths of this heightened sensitivity, this can help to moderate these tensions, and in turn help to heal polarization in a classroom.

The characteristics of the millennial generation have been the subject of much reflection and commentary. Research indicates their focus on care and concern for others. For example, when asked to identify "one of the most important things in their lives," 52% responded being a good parent; 30%, having a successful marriage; 21%, helping others in need; and only 15%, having a high paying career.³ On the flip side, frailties emerge when this sensitivity takes the form of excessive attention to social appearances. Millennials may also fear that others' preconceptions or judgments may isolate them from their peers. The tension between concern and insecurity can make it difficult to foster robust conversation across profound difference in a variety of social, cultural and educational environments.

How might teachers in a variety of settings help students to acknowledge the source of such tension and use the energy of that realization to amplify the strengths that their height-

ened sensitivity to relationships may offer? This book details methods that have emerged from team-teaching a graduate level seminar, *Religion, Morality & Contested Claims for Justice*.⁴ After a brief explanation of our foundations, we outline five steps to help students move toward a more thoughtful reflection process that helps them to develop communication skills so as to foster attentive respect and openness to other students' ideas and identities.

Our method is based on a few basic principles. First, our class engages issues that touch upon the deepest levels of personal and communal identity. The readings and our discussions probe deeply-held assumptions, ethical aspirations, and moral norms underlying contested policy and legal issues. We invite this inquiry with the conviction that a pedagogical space should allow students to explore the values and norms often overlooked in the policy-making discussions. This helps uncover the many meanings and tensions operating within policy debates and also brings to the surface unperceived disagreements and differences over underlying premises and principles.

Second, we believe that our primary role as teachers is to help students explore their own and others' views and by reflection to tease out the underlying connections and tensions between their views and those of others

in the wider horizon of the conversations. As they approach these issues from many angles, our students manifest divergent, even irreconcilable, positions. Some have thought long and hard about what supports their policy positions; some very little. They comprise a spectrum of opinions—progressives, conservatives, deeply pious, agnostic, radicals, skeptical, and indifferent. Each student has wrestled with their upbringing and the historical, cultural, and moral influences that have shaped their views; few have entirely consistent positions across policy issues and moral norms.

Third, our goal is not to change our students' minds about their substantive positions. Rather, we seek to complicate and develop their own reflection about the issues and give respectful, patient reflection upon others' positions and views. We model for students, and encourage them to adopt what we call "a hermeneutics of goodwill." This involves seeking a fair and comprehensive interpretation and analysis of an author's or classmate's position before rushing to judge critically or dismiss the position. This hermeneutic also involves resisting the urge to impose a framework on a position because of readily-available proxies (e.g. "this is a liberal/conservative argument that I need not take seriously since I disagree with the outcome/conclusion"). Part

of developing a critical and reflective appreciation for arguments over policy in light of the underlying norms and values expressed in those policies is allowing the complexity of the positions to come into the foreground.

Finally, our method is intended to address policy positions not as isolated kernels of thought floating in the ideological ether but as positions that people have adopted and applied in real lives. A hermeneutic of goodwill requires a more comprehensive engagement with the full scope of the arguments around a policy position, its underlying premises, *and* the narrative histories and identities of those who advance the arguments. The chains of reasoning people use to draw a conclusion about a policy issue are unique to them, involving reflection (of varying degrees of sophistication), intuition, emotion, and varying degrees of acceptance or rejection of their own history, culture, and experiences. We advocate neither deference nor acquiescence. Approaching a person with whom you disagree, while seeking to recognize and understand the full complexity of how they have arrived at their position, requires solicitude and patience, even while the goal may be to discern critically where you disagree and fully articulate a judgment of the deficiencies of others' positions.

We engage this method where disagreements over reasonably held positions may

arise. We acknowledge that situations might arise where a speaker advocates for certain kinds of violence or for excluding certain persons from social discourse on the basis of their gender, race, creed, or ethnicity, among other factors. For instance, we admit reasonable disagreement and open conversation about conscientious accommodations in the realm of same-sex marriage but disallow statements that degrade or dehumanize persons who are homosexual. Societal norms and local customs will also inform what is out of bounds in a particular classroom. Our method does not specify how to set those boundaries. We have generally been fortunate that our students have not advocated positions hostile to other students' safety and well-being. Nevertheless, some readers may face the real possibility of having to affirm a boundary and rebut or disallow statements that deny the basic dignity of others. It is a challenge, however, to set boundaries for effective dialogue concerning divisive issues without exacerbating the polarization.

Five Steps to Healing Polarization in the Classroom

An initial word on the “mechanics” of our pedagogical method for a discussion-based seminar. We ask students to turn in reflection papers twenty-four hours in advance of the seminar meeting time. Based on these, we formulate an agenda that is circulated prior to the class discussion, helping students come into the class meeting with the perception of a potential conversational connection with their peers. In our experience, when students are encouraged to refine habits of reflection and are aided in perceiving potential conversational connections, the organic result frequently is the formation of a community that stretches across multiple political, ethnic, social and religious differences. In this context they can work to hone the communication and dialogue skills that will help them to respect, engage, and learn from others who think differently. This context also offers an opportunity to reflect on how their own rhetorical choices may be received and understood by people with whom they may differ in some respect.

The five steps presented in this book aim to help each student in the class to:

1. Prioritize reflective over reactive habits of mind
2. Discern the potential for conversational connections with other colleagues
3. Be fully present and engaged in the classroom discussion
4. Actively take responsibility for full participation by all members of the class
5. Learn to lean into disagreement and conflict

The sections that follow describe in more detail each pedagogical step. Our own students provide examples of how these methods have informed their thought process, growth and engagement with others who think differently.

We have worked out these methods in the context of relatively small (15-20 students) discussion-based seminars that focus on how personal and religious values intersect with questions of law, politics and public policy. We realize that larger settings and time constraints limit the practicality of implementing some of our suggestions. For this reason, the book concludes with a reflection on how the methods may be adapted for diverse educational settings.