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STUDENT-LED CIVIC EDUCATION: A Different Way of Knowing

By Harold H. Saunders, David Tukey, Amy Lazarus,
and Rhonda Fitzgerald

More than a decade ago at a student leadership conference, participants were urged to press their universities' administrations to address racism by creating more centers or courses on African American studies. One student replied, "We already have good courses, but they just provide the sociologists', the political scientists', or the psychologists' approaches. On my campus, we're experimenting with a different way of knowing. We're learning about racism from each other's experience. We engage in sustained dialogues that surface racism's day-to-day forms and provide spaces to talk about them deeply and honestly."

While African American history, constitutional law, democratic thought and politics, and more are taught well in the classroom, we suggest that the capacities that mark active and effective citizens in a democracy are learned most tellingly through experience.

Our country is deeply and angrily divided. Many Americans struggle with the challenge of restoring civil and productive discourse to our public life. A related concern is the debate in higher education about how most effectively to prepare students for a constructive role in our body politic. We offer three thoughts.

First, citizenship may be learned more effectively through carefully designed experience than in the classroom.

Second, we might better prepare tomorrow's citizens if we named precisely the arts and practices that "civic education" must teach.

Third, Sustained Dialogue® provides a systematic, disciplined, student-led process for learning through experience—"a different way of knowing"—to make "difference" a source of strength rather than a cause for confrontation. Sustained Dialogue is the five-stage dialogue-to-action peace process that transforms relationships and designs change in communities. Hal Saunders' experience as former Assistant Secretary of State under Henry Kissinger, mediating five Arab-Israeli agreements in six years, including the Camp David

accords in 1978 and the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty, provided the first insights that he eventually incorporated in Sustained Dialogue. At the request of Princeton students, Hal worked to adapt this system for young campus leaders.

The traditional paradigm for the study and practice of politics focuses on action and reaction around power defined as the ability to coerce or control. Confrontation is the medium of political exchange. Some students outside the classroom are being introduced to a paradigm that focuses on interaction. It focuses on transforming destructive relationships into constructive relationships. Power is generated by citizens' capacity to work together. It is defined as the capacity to influence the course of events.

For a century, physical and life scientists have been working from a post-Newtonian world view that focuses not on action and reaction but on a cumulative, multilevel, open-ended process of continuous interaction as the essence of change and of relationship. Citizens must be able to relate to the experiences of peers in order to be successful and effective in engaging in democratic processes.

An important component of such relating is empathy. This is no longer just an observable experience in human interaction. Neuroscientists can now explain the pathways in the brain that produce it. Researchers such as Peter Salovey suggest that empathy (which, in moderation, can be positively correlated with "emotional intelligence") has been critical for the evolution of our species and our societies.

Here's how it works according to Laurie Carr and her colleagues at the University of California Los Angeles' Ahmanson-Lovelace Brain Mapping Center and Neuropsychiatric Institute: When one person listens to another, a particular brain circuit in the person listening creates a mimicking "representation" of the postures and movements of the person speaking. This representation is then relayed to the emotion-rich limbic system, which initiates the feelings the person listening would experience if his or her body were postured like the person speaking; this is empathy. Importantly, areas of the limbic system are heavily regulated by a neurotransmitter (dopamine) that attaches priority to experiences accom-

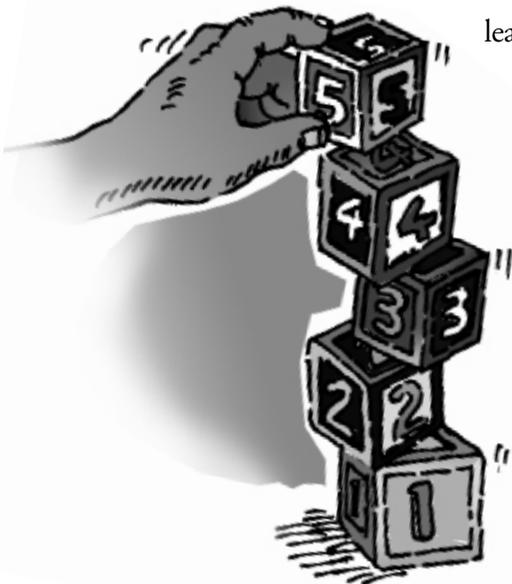


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panied by perceived value (often termed emotion), suggesting that experiences involving empathy will be tagged as particularly significant memories. Therefore, empathic experiences—a critical component of learning how to orchestrate democratic processes—are only truly encountered through meaningful interaction.

One avenue for interaction is dialogue. Dialogue is experienced when individuals listen carefully enough to one another to be changed by what they hear. Dialogue defined in that way is the essence of relationship, and politics is about relationship—not just about power. The concept of relationship also comprises identity, interests, perceptions, and misperceptions—stereotypes—and modes of interaction. It is dialogue that makes democracy work because dialogue is at the heart of preventing deep-rooted human differences from becoming destructive and developing mutual respect and shared interest to resolve differences peacefully. When sustained, dialogue can become a change process.

The Sustained Dialogue Campus Network (SDCN), now working on fifteen campuses to address divisive issues such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion, employs a five-stage process for transforming relationships—destructive and constructive—through dialogues conducted throughout the academic year by well-trained student moderators. (See www.sd-campus-network.org)



Sustained Dialogue differs from most other learning and change processes in two ways. First, it focuses on the relationships that underlie conflict and intractable problems, working with a carefully defined concept of relationship. Second, because relationships don't change quickly, it works its way through five stages, bringing the same participants together regularly. It heeds Albert Einstein's warning that solutions to problems are rarely found in the thinking that caused them. Dialogue enables participants to redefine problems, not in terms of their symptoms but in terms of their causes.

If we advocate deliberately creating spaces for systematic learning through interaction, as the students practicing Sustained Dialogue have done, we must define rigorously what is to be learned. We have developed a list of “civic competencies” to improve the shaping of those spaces and judgment of what learning is taking place:

1. Learning to learn from the experience of interacting with others. Developing emotional and social intelligence.

Classmates at a recent 55th university reunion panel were asked: “What did you take away from your higher education that was especially important for your later personal and professional development?” All gave credit to excellent professors and rich course offerings. But, all underscored what they learned in campus interactions. “This is where I grew up.”

Two members of the 5th reunion class were asked to comment. One responded, “The purpose of secondary education has been captured in the ‘3 R’s—reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic.’ For me, college had its own ‘3 R’s’: reason, responsibility, relationship. Of these, reason might be said to be learned primarily in the classroom; responsibility takes one form as responsibility to oneself for curricular learning and another as responsibility to others as a citizen of the campus community or as part of a campus project, activity, or team; relationships are built primarily through interactions in residential life.”

Sustained Dialogue graduates echo these sentiments: “Sustained Dialogue is where I learned leadership, democracy, living with difference, and dealing with government (administration).”

2. Learning the art and practice of dialogue as the medium for developing and conducting productive relationships.

One source of learning, of course, is exposure to great ideas through authors, teachers, and mentors. A second is, as Keith Melville, a core faculty of the Fielding Graduate University, says, “talking, listening, learning, the give and take of learning conversations.” To be sure, they can take place in the classroom, but some subjects are not easily or deeply discussed in the classroom. Students turn to Sustained Dialogue because it is

a rare space to probe “taboo” subjects deeply; nowhere else can they learn by probing experience rather than through “intellectualizing.” Sustained Dialogue moderators find that “intellectualizing” a problem in a dialogue group is often a way of avoiding its painful depths.

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3. Learning the tools (e.g., listening, questioning with a purpose, dialogue, deliberation) and concepts (relationship) for probing and analyzing experience in ways that produce practical conclusions peacefully and civilly.

This is where the curriculum is most clearly set apart from learning through campus interactions. When the students at Princeton were ready to start their first Sustained Dialogues, they were asked, “Who will moderate your dialogue groups?” The quick answer: “No member of the teaching faculty. They would just turn our groups into politics, sociology, or psychology seminars. We have a different way of knowing; we’re going to learn about racism from our own experiences.”

“A different way of knowing.” This is where the distinction between curricular and interactive learning sharpens, where students learn that theory can come from conceptualization of experience as well as from academic analysis. A real contribution to a conversation can come not only from new knowledge but also from the internalization of an idea or data and from processing that against one’s own experience. David Scobey at Bates refers to this as an individual’s capacity for “meaning-making.”

This is also where a distinction between service-learning and Sustained Dialogue, for instance, becomes clear. Although students learn many useful things from community service, ultimately, their formal way of learning from that service is to analyze their experience under rules determined by their home discipline. In Sustained Dialogue, students internalize experience and learn from it in whatever way makes sense to them in light of their broader experience. They take responsibility for developing their own way of knowing.

4. Cultivating the courage to act fairly through interaction in dialogue; developing and internalizing a sense of respect for

others—fairness, decency, justice, right and wrong; honing the ability to judge.

Deciding what is “the right thing” can come from reading the philosophers, but it can also come from experiencing injustice as shared in dialogue. Many children learn a sense of fairness from their parents, or a code of ethics from religious teaching, or philosophical arguments for right and wrong in college. But, a working conscience is probably honed through the experience of interacting in a social context.

5. Learning how to create spaces for dialogue on difference and for the peaceful resolution of differences.

Learning how to deal with deep-rooted human difference seems difficult to learn in the classroom and is more likely to be influenced by campus culture, which is the product of how students interact collectively. One of the most difficult questions is whether it is possible for students in groups to think strategically about how to change discriminatory practices and institutions on campus, how to change the racial climate on campus, and how to change campus culture. The possibilities can be learned in dialogue among students. Administrators can be supportive, but if students don't initiate change, it will not happen. There are some things only governments can do, but there are some things only citizens can do—transform conflictual human relationships, modify human behavior, and change political culture. Inequitable structures that are currently in place were initially created by people. Therefore, if people can identify and challenge these structures, people can change them.

6. Learning to develop and present information about how members of a community define community problems, talk about them, frame options for dealing with them, and decide on courses of action.

It is important in an academic institution to learn appropriate methods of research and the capacity to marshal necessary information for resolving public as well as academic problems. Numerous methodologies for “measuring” public opinion are

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taught in the classroom. Again, however, we have a feeling that too little attention is paid to probing experience in ways that give meaning to events around us.

Our messages are more about how we want to relate to people around us than they are academic. How I present myself is a question of relationship, which will not be learned in the classroom, yet which must be learned to lead citizens effectively.

7. Learning “a different way of knowing.” Do I learn from books or from relating and dialogue—i.e., from experience?

Typical student comments in a year-end survey of participants in 75 campus Sustained Dialogues suggest their answer:

- “Sustained Dialogue is simply more beneficial. The classroom experience is helpful, but discussion with peers allows for better understanding. It’s more personal.”
- “In classrooms, you hear about the big things ... in dialogue, you learn about the small things that really affect people you care about right now. It’s much more powerful ...”
- “Personal accounts seem to carry more weight than something being broken down on an academic level where sympathy and individual experience are often overlooked.”
- “Experiential and empathetic learning have longer-lasting effects.”

Of course, these competencies may also be learned organically through a broad range of campus experiences, including participation in athletic teams, campus newspapers, work-study, student governments, and theater groups. But, in Sustained Dialogue, the learning is more explicitly related to transforming relationships, and how these transformations impact the community.

Within the student-led and organized Sustained Dialogue program, students are learning the tools that influence how they encounter the world after graduation. About three-quarters of current participants, moderators, and leaders say that they are thinking more critically about the experiences of others, and also

considering how those experiences might be improved after a year of dialogue about campus issues relating to social identity. Over half of these students say that their Sustained Dialogue experience has made them feel more like an important member of their community, and they are now more inclined toward getting involved in shaping that community. Nearly two-thirds say that after a year of Sustained Dialogue, they are more interested in advocating for equity in new contexts and that they feel more empowered to make a positive impact on their current and future communities.

For students leading the Sustained Dialogue movement, these civic inclinations become even more pronounced, with 83 percent reporting that they feel empowered not just to make an impact on their current campus community, but also on future communities. While these survey findings may be encouraging to professionals in higher education, it is also significant that these student perceptions seem to translate into measurable civic outcomes in alumni.

Dr. Ande Diaz, now Associate Dean of Students at Roger Williams University, witnessed the founding of Sustained Dialogue as an administrator at Princeton. Diaz's research surveyed Sustained Dialogue students after they graduated from the University of Notre Dame, Princeton University, and the University of Virginia. In her thesis, *Composing a Civic Life: Influences of Sustained Dialogue on Post-Graduate Civic Engagement and Civic Life*, Diaz writes that Sustained Dialogue was associated with civic attitudes and cognitions, as well as effective postgraduate civic behaviors in graduates' educational institutions and workplaces; in work on policy creation and advocacy; and in the challenging of inequities. The study confirmed research based on the Intergroup Dialogue model, and furthered scholarship on the civic outcomes of dialogue by finding that reported impacts of student-led dialogue affected the participants' post-college work experience, as well as their future hopes and plans. For example, a premedical participant now wants to enter public medicine as a result of his Sustained Dialogue experience.

In "Sustained Dialogue: How Students Are Changing Their Own Racial Climate (*About Campus* 11 (Mar-Apr 2006): 17-23), Priya Parker, founder of Sustained Dialogue at the University of Virginia and former SDCN Program Director wrote, "Important questions to ask include whether the institutional value of diversity

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actually penetrates into the student body, whether institutional values pertaining to diversity affect race relations in a positive and discernable way, and if they do not, how administrators can help change this relationship.” Through Sustained Dialogue, students take responsibility for shaping and reshaping their own perceptions of campus climate and shaping the campus climate itself. Sustained Dialogue is a starting point, offering students a tangible process for addressing potentially divisive issues, including race.”

Students—citizens—taking responsibility. That’s the goal of civic education. SDCN works with students, campuses, and communities to build the movement to engage and empower future leaders to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

In the end, of course, as one student wrote: “The two (kinds of learning) go hand in hand.” Nothing written here should be interpreted as denigrating classroom learning. But there is “a different way of knowing.” Perhaps that’s what is missing from higher education’s approach to civic education.