



21st Century Civics Skills Training

Dialogue Across Difference

February, 2026



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INTRODUCTION

How do we communicate with those with whom we disagree? Is dialogue across party lines--or other divides--possible in a political community as fractured as ours? And if so, what, if anything, can such dialogues accomplish?

While dialogue has long preoccupied scholars of democracy,¹ these sorts of questions have returned to the fore in the United States in the aftermath of the 2016 elections. Since then, **bridging organizations**--organizations that aim to strengthen social connections--have emerged to show that dialogue across difference is both possible and critically important to democracy. Some draw on the work of international organizations that focus on conflict resolution/peacemaking; for them, structured dialogues are meant to help participants in a conflict understand the other side. Other bridging organizations focus on citizen engagement in government through deliberative practices. Instead of attempting to heal fractured relationships, these efforts are more problem-oriented; participants deliberate together to make recommendations on a proposed public policy. There are many other models, as well. Indeed, a [2024 NYTimes](#) article describes the proliferation of such groups as “evidence that bridge-building has become the hot new concept in a country looking for hope.”

No matter the form they take, these interventions teach and advocate for a set of interpersonal skills to help people work through disagreement. These practices can be utilized in a variety of contexts: boardrooms, dinner tables, Youtube comment sections, or town hall meetings, to name just a few collective settings (see the collective settings module for more on these spaces). Educational spaces, however, provide a unique opportunity to practice productive dialogues across difference through, as visiting SNF Agora Fellow AY 24-25 Dr. Leila Brammer describes, “creating a container” for disagreement. For Brammer, something as simple as asking each person to first share their personal stake or interest in a contentious topic can help mitigate the kind of vitriol often associated with heated debates.

More generally, though, bridging organizations can help mitigate some of the problems that hyper-polarization poses for all democracies, including ours. The remainder of this module draws on the expertise of SNF Agora scholars and practitioners to articulate the contours of the problem along with offering participants a chance to practice the civic skills--listening and speaking in conversation--critical to solving it.

KEY CONCEPTS

Every **pluralistic** (explicitly and openly diverse) political community will include a wide variety of views on any particular topic. Neither disagreement nor difference, more generally, are threats to democracy. Indeed, the opposite is true: both are critical to the type of vigorous public debates on which democracy depends. Differences can harden into binary and conflicting partisan identities, however. This phenomenon is what political scientists call **political or ideological polarization**. **Affective polarization** emerges if and when political or ideological polarization leads to dislike and distrust of political or ideological outgroups. In other words, whereas political or ideological polarization describes groups organized according to ideas or beliefs about the best way to organize our common life, affective polarization names divisions arranged around perceived friends and perceived enemies. Unsurprisingly, affective polarization can cause hostility, conflict, and reduced capacity for the kind of collective decision-making critical to democracy. In short, one cannot compromise with someone who is perceived to be an enemy. All that said, political scientists have also found evidence of **false polarization**: an overestimation of differences or disagreements. False polarization is associated with increased distrust of political institutions.

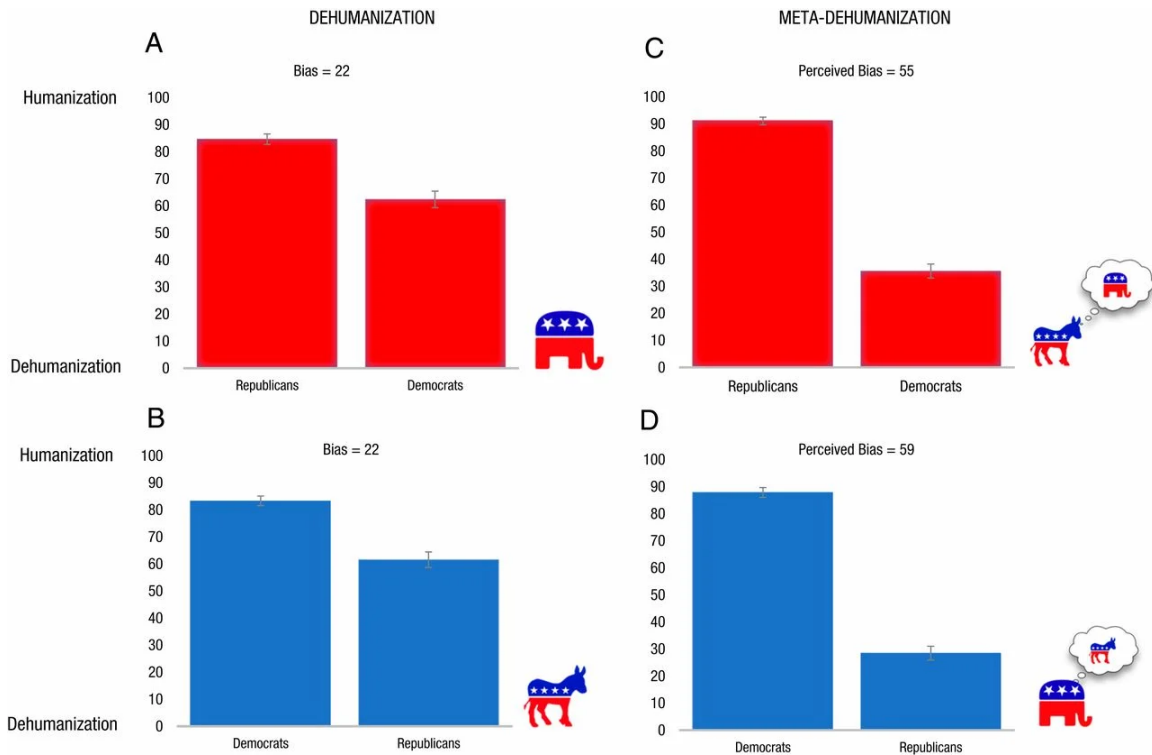
On the flipside, some degree of **social cohesion**, understood as the ability of a political community to function as a collective, is critical to democracy. But building social cohesion in pluralistic political communities is challenging, even in the best of times. Ultimately, this is where bridging organizations propose to intervene. Dialogue across difference can help do precisely that.

THE INCREASED DIFFICULTY OF CONVERSATION

In 2023, the Pew Research Center reported that 84% of adults in the United States feel political debate has become less respectful and 61% feel political conversations with someone who disagrees are “stressful and frustrating.” Another study found that over 40% of Democrats and Republicans believe that in addition to being bad for politics, those in the other party are “downright evil.”²

These troubling trends suggest widespread affective polarization. There is certainly some truth to this analysis. But upon closer inspection, false polarization also seems to be an important--if largely neglected--part of the story. A study on meta-perceptions shows how a representative sample of Republicans and Democrats *both* exaggerate the levels of perceived bias/dehumanization. The left-hand graphs in the figure below show that Republicans and Democrats alike are biased against their partisan opponents (Democrats, for example, report about an 82 humanity rating for other Democrats and a 60 humanity rating for Republicans – Graph B). However, the *perceived* levels of dehumanization (graphs on the right) are far greater than actual bias. Republicans, for example, think Democrats would give other Democrats an 87 humanity rating and Republicans a 25 humanity rating (Graph

D). So while affective polarization is real, it is not quite as pronounced as many partisans think.³



Caption from article: *Study 1 dehumanization and meta-dehumanization reported by a representative sample of political partisans. Donkey = Democrats; elephant = Republicans; red bars = responses/perceived responses by Republicans; blue bars = responses/perceived responses by Democrats. (A and B) Humanity ratings of both target groups reported by Republicans (A) and Democrats (B), and in-group–out-group bias (i.e., dehumanization); (C and D) levels of humanity each group thought the other would report toward both target groups and the perceived bias (i.e., meta-dehumanization): how Democrats thought Republicans would respond (C), and how Republicans thought Democrats would respond (D). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.*

POLARIZATION AND ITS PROBLEMS

Polarization is not necessarily new. Nor is it necessarily harmful. Many political psychologists have argued that social categories help us understand where we belong and who we are in the world--providing powerful motivation to think in terms of groups.^{4,5} At its best, polarization can encourage the behaviors necessary for a functioning democracy (like voting and protesting) and ensures diverse policy alternatives.⁶

Belonging cuts both ways, though. While we may feel an unspoken affinity with members of our own group, bridging purportedly natural group differences

is often quite difficult. Taking the perspective of out-group members can be frustrating, in no small part because it can create cognitive dissonance. Viewing things from another perspective helps us see ourselves--and our groups--differently. More to the point, we might learn things about our own groups that we would rather avoid. On the flipside, however, bridging group difference brings joy and is exciting – research shows a reciprocal relationship between serotonin levels in the brain and prosocial behavior.⁷ How to acknowledge the necessity of groups while, at the same time, recognizing that democracy requires different groups to compromise, if not collaborate? Research reveals a few different paths forward.

PATHS FORWARD

These paths forward can be categorized in three different levels: micro, meso and macro. Hartman and colleagues employ the TRI framework: interventions for thoughts, relationships and institutions (TRI) to explain.⁸

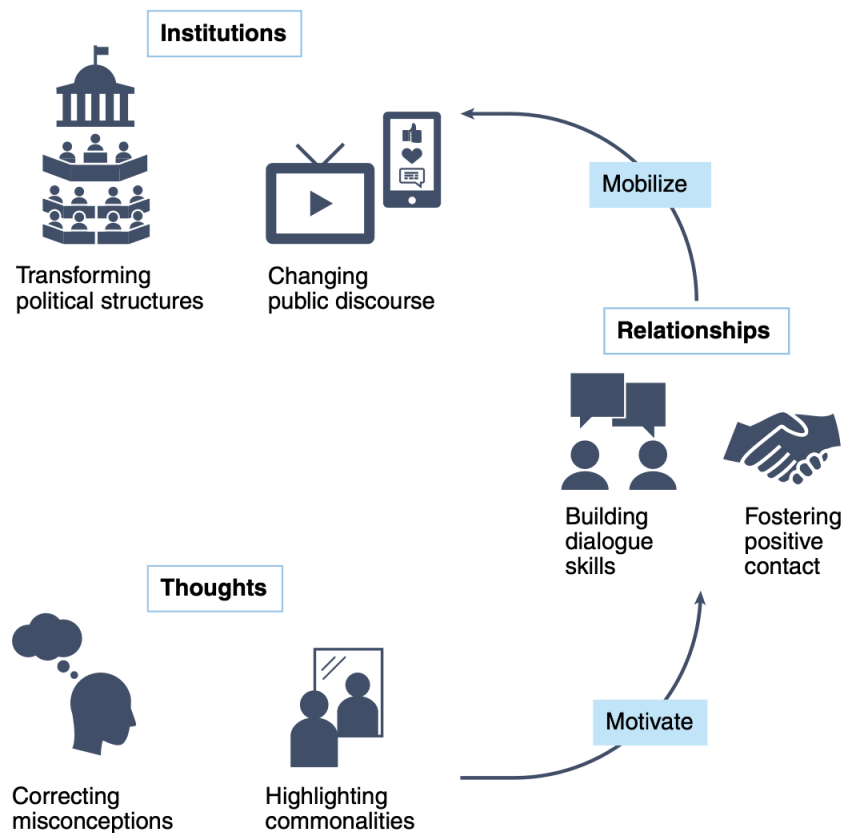


Fig. 1 | Six themes of interventions for reducing partisan animosity.

THE MICRO-LEVEL: THOUGHTS

In some situations, intervening at the individual level involves *correcting misconceptions* and *highlighting commonalities* to contest perceived differences among partisans. Although these interventions are limited (there is plenty of disagreement that cannot be circumvented by highlighting other commonalities), there is evidence suggesting that they can work. Correcting meta-perceptions--like the perceived biases about partisan hostility in the figure above--can reduce animosity in the short term. Challenging stereotypes and in-group/out-group biases (we often tend to ascribe more negative traits to the out-group – but metacognitive training can help to correct this) can have a similar effect. Highlighting commonalities among participants can be an effective way of correcting misconceptions that suggest partisans also disagree about morals, values, and personality traits. The Finding Common Ground Initiative (<https://vop.org/finding-common-ground/>) highlights over 170 policy positions that are supported by both Republicans and Democrats. Additionally, finding community-based identities in common (such as sports or books) may be particularly effective in reducing negative attitudes.

THE MESO-LEVEL: RELATIONSHIPS

Conflict is uncomfortable (lots of bodily indicators can tell us such). How to stick with dialogue to better understand our partisan opponents, appreciate the values behind their position, and, ideally, transform contentious debates into problems to be solved? Correcting individual misperceptions and highlighting commonalities in one part of the depolarization puzzle. Intervening on the meso-level involves creating opportunities for partisans to have contact with one another. Not all contact is constructive, though. Hartman and colleagues lay out seven conditions for contact to reduce animosity: “1. equal group status within the contact situation, 2. common goals, 3. intergroup cooperation, 4. the support of authorities, law or custom, ... [5.] having the potential for friendship with an out-group member... 6. including training in dialogue skills and 7. structuring contact interventions to highlight common identities, behaviors, preferences, and more” (p. 1197)⁶.

How to cultivate the conditions that help partisans make this kind of contact? Bridging organizations work to create positive intergroup contact and often incorporate dialogue skills training. Organizations such as Braver Angels, Bridge USA, and More in Common (see the Resources section for links to these organizations and many other bridging organizations), work to support specific forms of dialogue between those with opposing political views and, importantly, highlight similarities among groups. These efforts are oriented towards building relationships across partisan differences. Goal-oriented bridging involves identifying a challenge and working in community to tackle that challenge. The Urban Rural Action organization facilitates community-driven economic development initiatives that require those across the political spectrum to collaborate. This model is more action-oriented: the goal is to achieve something together. For more examples of bridging organizations, see

the Resources section.

Do these efforts work? In short, we do not know. And, indeed, it is difficult to measure effectiveness because there is no common understanding of what it means to be effective. A 2021 meta-analysis of intergroup contact interventions found very small long-term changes in bias reduction across the over 400 experiments included in the study.⁹ Allison Ralph (founder of Cohesion Strategy) explains the complicated landscape:

My gut instinct is that high quality, light-touch bridging strategies do have a net positive impact. A small change for a lot of people in affective polarization, bias, and violence, for example, is still good. I also have a suspicion that light-touch contact strategies provide on-ramps for a few people toward much more extensive engagement in pro-democracy work and even building pro-democracy projects of their own.

However, the downsides to some light-touch strategies remain deeply concerning. Contact strategies that reach too far across single divides often ask disadvantaged individuals to show up to spaces that validate the interests of the already advantaged. Then, even when successful, the principle-implementation gap means that advantaged participants often don't pony up with behavior change. And that leads to more burnout and distrust from disadvantaged communities. (<https://democracytakes.substack.com/p/are-bridging-programs-effective>)

Ralph ultimately suggests the need for more broad-based deliberative initiatives. While more research needs to be done regarding efficacy, emerging evidence suggests that citizens assemblies can have longer term positive effects on individuals and communities.

THE MACRO-LEVEL: INSTITUTIONS

Our political institutions encourage polarization and partisan animosity. And political institutions are notoriously resistant to change, especially at the federal level. But even if it were possible to redesign (some parts of some) institutions, it is difficult to measure efficacy. There are simply too many variables to identify clear causal linkages.

That said, Hartman and colleagues describe a change in public discourse as a force for institutional change. Changing the tenor of political debates, in other words, can help transform political structures, at least in the long-term. But this is not without its own challenges. On the one hand, social media companies benefit from algorithms that breed polarization and hostility (by leveraging psychological tendencies). On the other hand, many politicians and media personalities promote hostile discourse. None of this means that dialogue across difference has no effect on institutions. Social movements have long demonstrated that public discourse--and public policy and political institutions--can change.¹⁰ To cite merely one small example: A 1982

conversation between the pastor of the black Coley Springs Baptist Church and the mostly white Warren County Concerned Citizens over the dumping of contaminated soil in a predominantly black county in North Carolina helped spark the contemporary environmental justice movement.^{11,12}

Indeed, advocates of relational organizing argue that collective action can change individual hearts and minds, build relationships across difference, *and* spark institutional change.¹³ The key, though, is to start with the people where they are; to spend time understanding others and engaging with questions rather than simply delivering a policy pitch.

LEARNING MODULE

LEARNING GOALS

- Identify contributions and pitfalls of interventions to reduce animosity, and their impact on a healthy democracy
- Justify the right balance of relationship-building versus changing minds
- Create a personalized approach to ‘dialogue across difference’

CIVIC SKILL(S)

Listening; speaking in conversation

MODULE OUTLINE

Introduction: small-group discussion; perception gap quiz

Read and discuss: The Public and its Problems (excerpt)

Read and discuss: People deserve safety on college campuses; ideas don’t

Read and discuss: Positive peace, A Letter from a Birmingham Jail

Activity: Dialogue training

Activity: Finding bridging organizations

Activity: What is my role?

INTRODUCTION TO LEARNING MODULE

DISCUSS IN SMALL-GROUPS:

Why is social cohesion important? When might it be less important?

What does social cohesion look like, and how do we know?

What are some ways that individuals, communities, and institutions bridge divides? What are the pros and cons of each approach?

Additionally, visit perceptiongap.us and take the quiz to see if your perceptions of those with different political affiliations than themselves match with actual views. This activity pairs nicely with Moore-Berg and colleagues’ research detailed in the Toxic polarization section above.

CASE STUDY: THE PUBLIC AND ITS PROBLEMS

Dewey's work on the nature of the public and the organization of a state explores the relationships between individuals' behaviors, collective experiences, and government structures, and how these relationships shape public opinion and governing decisions. Many see parallels between the 'problems of the public' Dewey describes and the division we experience today. Dewey's vision of democracy is one that happens outside of government buildings – in everyday behaviors and social interactions. Democracy is imperfect, and Dewey advocates for continued discussion around the great experiment, how to constantly amend and make it better. *Deliberative democracy*, or a form of democracy that emphasizes deliberation (discussion and debate) over voting for decision-making, has gained increasing academic attention since the 1990s, and serves as a vision for overcoming the problems of social interaction and decision-making Dewey observed in this historic work. This viewpoint is a good starting place for understanding the importance of interpersonal communication, especially in the arena of governance and decision-making. The reading can help learners begin to question their assumptions about how politics works and offers a new understanding of what makes a productive democracy.

"...modification of views to meet the opinions of minorities, the relative satisfaction given the latter by the fact that it has had a chance and that next time it may be successful in becoming a majority."

READ THE FOLLOWING:

John Dewey 1927, p. 207-208 <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31158001882447?urlappend=%3Bseq=219%3Bownerid=115691551-237> (10-14 minute read)

As you read, interpret the following quotes from the excerpt in context. Be ready to discuss your answers.

- The ballot is, as often said, a substitute for bullets.
- Majority rule, just as minority rule, is as foolish as its critics charge it with being.
- The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion.

Discussion Question: What is Dewey advocating for? Are there parallels to contemporary politics?

Learners may discuss ideas such as: He is talking about how opinions and 'majorities' are formed. It is not necessarily about 'winning' the majority, but the process one uses to create a majority. Learners might draw comparisons to the slim majorities we now see in presidential elections – coalition building (i.e., modifying ideas, gathering more who agree) is less common.

EXTEND THE LEARNING:

Using Dewey’s words as inspiration, create recommendations for intervention related to reducing partisan animosity at each level.

Micro-level interventions:

Meso-level interventions:

Macro-level interventions:

CASE STUDY: PEOPLE DESERVE SAFETY ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES; IDEAS DON’T

Many are familiar with the political polarization of college campuses. Critics offer that institutions of higher education are decentralized entities that are extremely permeable to sociocultural issues. While what we might see on the news would have us believe there is a singular (politicized) experience for how to be on a college campus, college life is not a monolith. And a plethora of viewpoints may exist on college campuses – if the right environment allows them to be discussed thoughtfully. In this op-ed, the authors make the case that our institutions need to be able to withstand tensions and debates among their community. Instead of mere exposure therapy, they wish for colleges to promote an argument culture that lies on a foundation of healthy peer-to-peer disagreement.

But you can’t fix an echo chamber by throwing more voices into it. That only makes the echoes louder. It seems so simple: just hire some conservatives to simulate balance. But a partisan dictate reinforces the worst of our polarized moment. The lesson it teaches is powerful and destructive: The terms of any dispute are defined in advance by two — and only two — sides. They are reducible to partisan affiliations and therefore not subject to change through argument. Students must choose one or another side in a tired debate, put on the jersey of their chosen team, find a like-minded coach, and play the game of modern American politics. They are deprived of the opportunity and the responsibility to think beyond our current partisan divide.

READ THE FOLLOWING:

The following op-ed makes the case for promoting an argument culture on college campuses that allows for healthy disagreement. The piece can be shared with learners: People deserve safety on college campuses; Ideas don’t: Perrin and Lundberg: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/03/29/opinion/people-deserve-safety-college-campuses-ideas-dont/> (9-12 minute read)

As you read, fill out the organizer below. Be ready to discuss your answers.

VIEWPOINT DIVERSITY	VIEWPOINT DEBATE
(authors' descriptions of current campus goal)	(authors' descriptions of desired campus goal)

Discussion Question 1: Instead of ‘balance’, what are the authors advocating for? Can you think of situations where this approach would not work?

Learners may discuss ideas such as: Authors are making the case for a healthy argument culture where viewpoints are separated from the people who hold them and evaluated with evidence. This may not work as intended when the viewpoint is perceived as threatening or power dynamics make evaluation challenging.

Discussion Question 2: How is this approach different from ‘bridging’ work? What would it take to evolve from ‘bridging’ to productive argumentation?

Learners may discuss ideas such as: Instead of promoting non-threatening, friendly contact or exposure, it instead promotes argumentation, changing minds with evidence, and detaching identities from ideas. Establishing a good relationship is an important first step, but productive argumentation involves logical thinking, reasoning, and the ability to not get attached to our views and a willingness (perhaps eagerness) to amend them.

EXTEND THE LEARNING:

Review the IDEAs in Action curriculum (“At a Glance”) mentioned in the article <https://ideasinaction.unc.edu/about/navigating-at-a-glance-fall25/> and be ready to discuss your initial reactions. What interests you about the curriculum? What seems promising? What would you change?

CASE STUDY: POSITIVE PEACE: LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL

Dr. Martin Luther King’s Jr. is perhaps best known for his “I have a Dream” speech delivered at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Earlier that year, however, he published a powerful essay in which he criticized white moderates for being more interested in “order” than justice. Among other things, King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” warns of the perils of moderation for its own sake. More importantly for our purposes here, King insists that not all relationships are “good” relationships. Bridging does not necessarily revitalize democracy; justice matters, too.

READ THE FOLLOWING:

The following is an excerpt from King's *Letter from a Birmingham jail* and can be shared with learners. Read the full letter here: https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

"I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured."

Discussion Question 1: What is the difference between negative and positive peace?

Learners may discuss ideas such as: Tranquility and comfort is associated with a negative peace, versus justice and actions to end oppression that is associated with a positive peace.

Discussion Question 2: What are the implications for the goals of dialogue and bridge-building?

Learners may discuss ideas such as: The goals of dialogue and bridge-building can expand to include identifying and challenging harmful ideas, being aware of power dynamics, and recognizing the role of institutional change.

EXTEND THE LEARNING:

On your own or in small groups, fill out the organizer below based on this viewpoint and what you have learned so far in this module.

	LESS USEFUL BRIDGE-BUILDING ASSUMPTIONS	MORE USEFUL BRIDGE-BUILDING ASSUMPTIONS
The goal		
The problem		
The solution		
Public posture		

Once you are finished, read <https://www.yesmagazine.org/opinion/2021/04/09/build-bridges-peace>) and compare your version with Bubman’s version.

ACTIVITY: DIALOGUE TRAINING

Read about the Story Circles practice: <https://usdac.us/storycircles>. After doing so, break into smaller groups (around 6 per group) and “Share a time that they felt invisible”. Each person should have about two minutes to share their story. Then, as a whole group, discuss the different ways people framed this issue and common themes that arose.

How do Story Circles help build belonging? What kinds of questions might help unpack stories in more detail?

After discussing these questions, complete the Braver Angels’ process for dialogue training – outlined below. This activity works best if each group has a large piece of chart paper and markers.

Choose a policy issue to discuss that you know will create a difference of opinion in your context – form groups, generally for or against. Some examples might include: gun control, abortion, the death penalty, artificial intelligence, college tuition, reparations. The goal is to have better conversations about these issues rather than finding complete solutions.

What assumptions do you believe the other side has about your side? Circle stereotypes that the other group has about your group that you think are rooted in a kernel of truth. After about 10 minutes, ask the groups to share their reflections on this process to the whole group.

After the reflection, smaller groups should generate clarifying questions for the other group based on what they just heard. Each group will have to decide their top two questions to ask the other side.

Back in the large group, take turns asking questions. The other side will have four minutes to answer, allowing two people from the group two minutes each to respond.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Based on this process, what are the strengths and limitations of dialogue? How might story circles strengthen dialogue? What questions remain?

OTHER EXTENSIONS:

Join the Unify Challenge College Bowl: <https://www.unifyamerica.org/college-bowl> Learners can participate in a one-on-one conversation across difference on controversial issues such as immigration, free speech on campus, and climate change. Conversations are structured to facilitate productive disagreement.

Use the online conversation simulator to learn and practice effective strategies for difficult conversations: <https://constructivedialogue.org/resources/conversation-simulator/#s>

ACTIVITY: FINDING BRIDGING ORGANIZATIONS

Individually or in small groups, find examples of interventions created by researchers and programs facilitated by practitioners that are designed to reduce animosity. Categorize the examples using the TRI framework (described above) and group examples by aim: bridging, peacebuilding, and/or relational organizing. Search for and document evidence of efficacy with each example before they evaluate the utility and application.

Good places to start for their search include the organizations listed under 'Resources', the Hartman and colleagues (2022) article: Hartman, R. et al. (2022). Interventions to reduce partisan animosity. *Nat Hum Behav*, 6(9), 1194-1205. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01442-3>

Use this organizer to capture your work.

Name	Link	Brief description	Evidence of efficacy? (if so, describe)	Research or practice?	TRI?	Bridging, peacebuilding, relational organizing?	Your evaluation

Are bridging programs effective? <https://democracytakes.substack.com/p/are-bridging-programs-effective>

BRIDGING ORGANIZATIONS	
American Exchange Project	More in Common
Beyond Conflict	More Like Us
Braver Angels	Narrative Initiative
BridgeUSA	National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation
Brigham Young, Social Connections Lab	National Institute for Civil Discourse
Care Lab	New Pluralists
NYU Center for Conflict and Cooperation	New_Public
Center for the Science of Moral Understanding	One America Movement
CoGenerate	Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley
Common Ground USA	Peace Through Action USA
Constructive Dialogue Institute	Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE)
Convergence Center for Policy Resolution	Plurality Institute
Divided We Fall	Re-Imagining Migration
DOC: Depolarizing Organizational Cultures	Redeeming Babel - The After Party
Essential Partners	Resetting the Table
Foundation for Social Connection	Service Year Alliance
FrameWorks Institute	StoryCorps - One Small Step
Future Caucus	Sustained Dialogue Institute
Global Centre for Pluralism	The Clapham Group
Humanity Forward	The Conversation U.S.

BRIDGING ORGANIZATIONS

<u>Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation</u>	<u>The Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley</u>
<u>Institute for Multipartisan Education</u>	<u>The History Co:Lab</u>
<u>Institute for Social Policy and Understanding</u>	<u>The Jerusalem Youth Chorus</u>
<u>Interactivity Foundation</u>	<u>Trust for Civic Life</u>
<u>Interfaith America</u>	<u>UNDIVIDED</u>
<u>Institute for Integrated Transitions</u>	<u>UNITE/The Dignity Index</u>
<u>Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange (RUX)</u>	<u>Urban Rural Action</u>
<u>Listen First Project</u>	<u>US Chamber of Connection</u>
<u>Living Room Conversations</u>	<u>The Village Square</u>
<u>Making Caring Common</u>	<u>Weave: The Social Fabric Project at the Aspen Institute</u>
<u>Mercatus Center: Pluralism and Civil Exchange</u>	<u>Welcoming America</u>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What approaches are most common? Least common? What forms of ‘evidence’ did you encounter? Any other patterns that you observed?

ACTIVITY: WHAT IS MY ROLE?

This activity involves a values affirmation exercise. Plenty of research suggests that these simple and brief interventions can buffer against feeling like an outsider and the negative emotions associated with stereotype threat. A quick Google search will surface many variations but the general idea is to choose the values most important to you and explain why. Choose the 2-3 values from a list that are the most important to you: creativity, independence, politics, learning knowledge, family, friendship, athleticism, belonging to a community or cultural group, nature, music, career, religion, humor, etc. Then, write how these values are important to you, including how the values influence your life and how you live up to the values. You’ll have an opportunity to share in partners, small groups, and the whole group.

Then, you’ll explore your own individual approaches to using what you are good at and your dialogue skills. You’ll review the Social Change Ecosystem Map and the introduction to the roles listed under readings. Consider which ones you find yourself playing most often.

READINGS:

Social Change Ecosystem map: <https://buildingmovement.org/our-work/movement-building/social-change-ecosystem-map/>
Visit <https://www.thereelanna.com/introduction-to-the-roles-for-social-change/> for summaries of each role.

Everyone has a different set of skills and orientations towards personality. How do you show up in the world? What are you good at? Maybe you are not meant for adversarial organizing, maybe you are more adept at empathic listening and dialogue. There are roles for each of us in social change.

“Our survival depends on the relationships we build. Some relationships are utilitarian— and sometimes that’s okay. If I can be useful to others, I should be. I am not important, but what I do— and don’t do— matters. My actions and inactions affect everyone and everything around me. We all play our role. None is more important than the others. But we all affect each other. Some roles and strategies seem insignificant or ineffective, but all together— all our different tactics and strategies and roles can get us what we need to survive, and thrive. But it is not a sure thing. We must fight for it.”

- Megan Swoboda as quoted in brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy : Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (p. 64)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What roles are you drawn to? Do you notice any patterns in your group? How might you perform these roles in the future? Are there other roles you are curious about? What roles absolutely are not for you?

RESOURCES

Allen, Danielle. *Our Declaration*. Liveright, 2014.

“Americans Agree Way More Than You Think. How Many of Them Can You Guess?” *Deseret News*, 27 Nov. 2024, <https://www.deseret.com/opinion/2024/11/27/americans-agree-way-more-than-you-think/>.

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ENDNOTES

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The Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University is an academic and public forum dedicated to strengthening global democracy through research, teaching, and practice. Inspired by the ancient Athenian Agora, the institute works to bridge divides, expand civic engagement, and foster inclusive dialogue as a cornerstone of democracy. Its scholars and practitioners collaborate to address challenges to democratic life and build resilience through research, applied learning, and public engagement.



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