Fostering Civil Discourse: The Importance of Trust for Critical Thinking Development

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Course Focus: HON 2020: Civil Discourse
How did we get here?

- **Summer 2017: CT2 Workshop, COMM 3570**
  - Updated, rebuilt course following CT2
  - Great success in student growth & development
- **Spring 2018: HON 2020 Opportunity**
  - Employed lessons from CT2
  - Sought to foster civil discourse in increasingly contentious political climate
Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past

Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values

1994
MEDIAN Democrat | MEDIAN Republican
Consistently liberal | Consistently conservative

2004
MEDIAN Democrat | MEDIAN Republican
Consistently liberal | Consistently conservative

2014
MEDIAN Democrat | MEDIAN Republican
Consistently liberal | Consistently conservative

Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public
Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats; the red area of Republicans. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple. Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).

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As partisan divides over political values widen, other gaps remain more modest

Average gap in the share taking a conservative position across 10 political values, by key demographics

Wider partisan gap on Trump job rating than for any president in six decades

% approving of president's job during first year...

- Trump: Dem 8% Rep 88%
- Obama: Dem 23% Rep 85%
- G.W. Bush: Dem 46% Rep 89%
- Clinton: Dem 22% Rep 72%
- G.H.W. Bush: Dem 51% Rep 83%
- Reagan: Dem 39% Rep 85%
- Carter: Dem 46% Rep 72%
- Ford: Dem 38% Rep 66%
- Nixon: Dem 49% Rep 83%
- Johnson: Dem 64% Rep 84%
- Kennedy: Dem 58% Rep 87%
- Eisenhower: Dem 56% Rep 87%


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How do we proceed?

- Course divided into three core segments
  - Civil Discourse Instruction (set ground rules/expectations)
  - Civil Discourse Practice (learn & grow together)
  - Civil Discourse in Community (exercise learning)
- Progressively more challenging topics
- Greater demonstration of CT over time
Challenges: What didn’t work?

- Early conflict - lack of trust & shared respect
  - Discussed & managed over time
- Early failure to think critically, support claims
  - Gentle, firm correction (each person empowered)
- Frustration with course ambiguity
  - Adjusted over time, found middle ground
Successes: What worked well?

- Deep, meaningful discussions on tough topics
  - Students’ views shifted based on classmates’ CT/arguments
- Compelling writing based on clear evidence
- Shared, trust-based space to correct classmates led to greater self-regulation in the classroom
- Students reported greater openness to other perspectives