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How to Cite: Biswas, Bidisha. 2019. Challenging Hegemony, Building Bridges: Pedagogical Tools to Mediate Campus Polarization. *ASIANetwork Exchange*, 26(1), pp. 26–32. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.292

Published: 19 June 2019

Peer Review:

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ARTICLE

Challenging Hegemony, Building Bridges: Pedagogical Tools to Mediate Campus Polarization

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This article is a summary of my keynote address to the ASIANetwork Conference in April 2018.
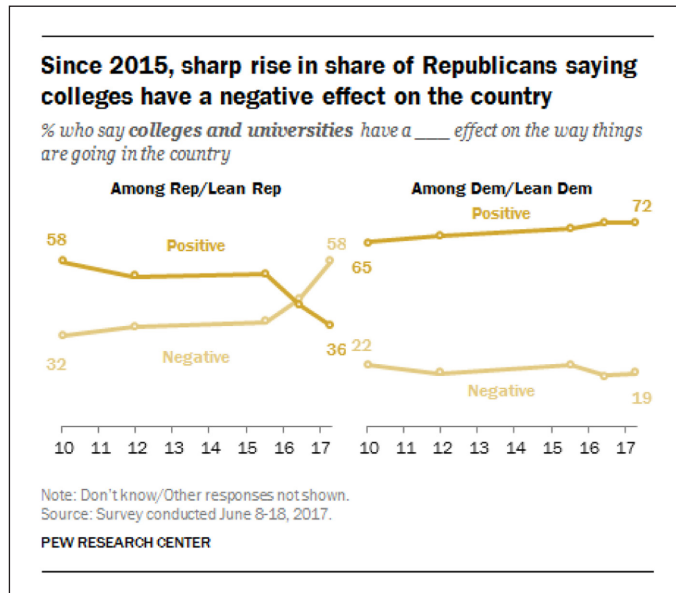

I am a professor of Political Science at Western Washington University, which is located about 80 miles north of Seattle. In April 2018, I had the honor of delivering a keynote address to the ASIANetwork conference in Philadelphia. When Karen Kingsbury, ASIANetwork Vice-Chair and Program Chair, invited me to the conference, she and I had a very inspiring conversation about the mission of ASIANetwork and how my work in pedagogy might align with that mission. I chose to structure the talk based on my own experiences in teaching political science in a national environment where the political dialogue is getting increasingly vitriolic. I hope that the keynote address, and this essay, lay a foundation for continuing debate about the impact that we, as educators, can have in ameliorating the polarization that we confront. Below, I summarize the key issues covered in my speech.

First, let's examine what political polarization actually looks like. We hear in the media that Americans are very divided. We also hear from politicians, or those aspiring for political office, that Americans are, in fact, united in their values and goals. Which is true? Regretfully, the data seems to align somewhat with the claim by the satirical news magazine, *The Onion*, that "90% of Americans are strongly opposed to each other".[1] A Pew Research Center study shows that in 2016, about 90% of Americans who identified as Republicans had negative views of Democrats, up from 74% in 1994. Similarly, 86% of Democrats held unfavorable to very unfavorable views of Republicans, up from 59% in 1994.

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[1] https://www.theonion.com/study-90-of-americans-strongly-opposed-to-each-other-1823168096.
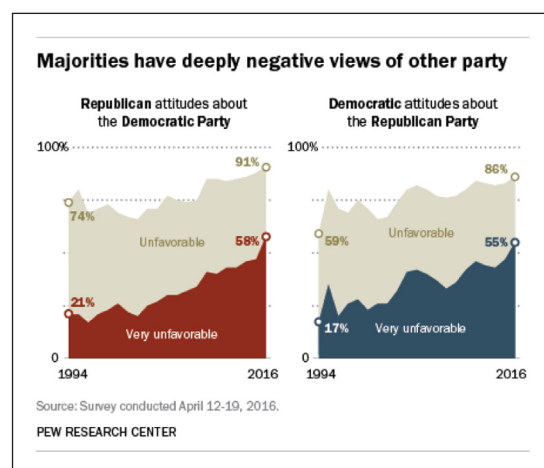
The study also showed significant divergence of opinions on key policy issues, including poverty alleviation, race, and immigration.

Since 2015, sharp rise in share of Republicans saying colleges have a negative effect on the country

% who say colleges and universities have a ____ effect on the way things are going in the country

Among Rep/Lean Rep   Among Dem/Lean Dem

Positive   Positive   72

58   58   65

Negative   36   22

32   Negative

                                                                  19

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17   10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17

Note: Don't know/Other responses not shown.
Source: Survey conducted June 8-18, 2017.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

In our profession, academia, the opinion lines are also disturbing. A 2017 study by Pew Research Center showed that 58% of Republicans believe that colleges have a negative impact on the country. Conversely, 72% of Democrats believe just the opposite; that colleges are good for the United States.[2] Clearly, such polarization has a negative impact on our pedagogical endeavors.

On a personal level, at my institution I am one of the very few (if not the only) first-generation immigrant-Americans and persons of color in the classroom. This creates some distinct challenges. As my co-author and I have discussed, students sometimes have difficulty recognizing our expertise and authority. Further, when we ask them to understand counter-hegemonic perspectives, they question the value of studying alternative viewpoints. Over time (and to be honest, only after my gaining tenure), I have embraced my subjective positionality. I use my own lived experiences as a way to get my students to be critical in their consumption of information and to

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[2] Fingerhut, Hannah. 2017. "Republicans skeptical of colleges' impact on U.S., but most see benefits for workforce preparation." Pew Research Center. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/20/republicans-skeptical-of-colleges-impact-on-u-s-but-most-see-benefits-for-workforce-preparation/.

actively question their presumptions and biases. As I become more aware of how *my* preconceived notions affect my work, I join them in this journey. The ideas I present below both frame my pedagogical approach and serve as guidelines for my students.[3]

In my classes we often discuss topics that directly inform policy, particularly foreign policy. I tell my students that while we will have many debates in class, it is not enough to "agree to disagree." Political disagreements have very real consequences in the world, and when those disagreements are not reconciled, however imperfectly, we lose our ability to build on a shared purpose. Absent an acknowledgment that our problems are shared, and therefore our solutions must also be shared, we cannot find collective answers to collective challenges.

Early on in my class, I tell students that we will embrace ambiguity. Ambiguity can be discomfiting, particularly in a world that is rapidly changing, but it is also a necessary part of the human condition. However, while we recognize and respect ambiguity our discussions must be solution-oriented. For this reason, I also emphasize teamwork in almost all my classes. Working in teams forces students to find common ground with others and to work together to produce a specific product (for example, a class presentation on a foreign policy issue).

I have also developed guidelines to facilitate respectful yet assertive class discussions and debates. The goal is for students to be able and willing to listen—not just hear, but actually listen—to opinions and experiences and perspectives that might clash with their own. These are also guidelines I use for myself.

First, leading by example, I try to **model respectful questioning**. When engaging in debates with students, even when I know the students' argument to be factually or logically wrong, I will pose questions along the following lines:

- "Can you tell me more about …?"
- "What's the most convincing piece of evidence for that view?"
- "How would you respond to [this] research that challenges your position?"

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[3] Biswas, Bidisha and Shirin Deylami. 2017. "Finding Agency in the Margins: Lessons from Teaching as Immigrant Women of Color." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 50(4): 1011–1014.

The goal of respectful questioning is *not* to give all opinions equal merit. Opinions that are based on falsehoods are fundamentally worth less than those that are from evidence-based analysis. Therefore, I emphasize that our goal is to analyze, not opine. Analyses and the conclusions that follow from them must be based on evidence and logical reasoning. Respectful questioning is designed to have students think through and critique their own reasoning. This is particularly important when we are discussing dominant ideas (for example, that US hegemony has enabled a peaceful and prosperous world). This is because dominant ideas can become so omnipresent that we fail to question their premises, which may in fact be faulty.

Second, and related to the above, I emphasize **respectful disagreement**. The phrases that I use and encourage students to use, include:

- "I take a different view on this and here's why."
- "My approach doesn't emphasize the same things; here's my line of analysis."

Note as well that there is a sequence between the first and second points. We must first understand the arguments being presented. We come to this understanding through respectful questioning. Once we comprehend the logical reasoning that has been used, we may then choose to disagree; but this disagreement should also be based on logical reasoning. For example, a student might say that she takes a different view of the pacifying impact of US hegemony by looking at American influence on the politics of El Salvador during the Cold War.

Reasonable and persuasive arguments are not always based on facts. **Personal experiences and emotions** can shape our normative boundaries and therefore our position on a given issue. For example, an advocate of hardline policies to stem illegal immigration may not be concerned about actual numbers of illegal immigrants. Perhaps the advocate has a strong belief in the rule of law and sees illegal entry into the country as a terrible crime that, like all crimes, must be punished and deterred. For example, if one is to present a counter argument about extending legal residency

rights to some undocumented immigrants,one must also address what rule of law means, both normatively and in practice.

In our polarized political environment, **humility** is in short supply. Feeling very strongly about an issue, to the negation of other perspectives, is often related to a certain hubris or arrogance in one's own knowledge, insight, and/or wisdom. Over years of teaching, I have consciously adopted ways to express appreciation for things that I learn from students, by using cues such as:

- "I never thought of it that way."
- "That is a new angle/information for me."

For a woman of color, or another underrepresented group, expressing humility in the classroom can be a double-edged sword. I am familiar with numerous occasions where educators from underrepresented groups have had their expertise challenged. For example, students may ask if we "really have a PhD" and in grading disputes, if they can "speak to a higher-up."[4] Humility, therefore, should be coupled with confidence, including the confidence to admit when one is wrong. It is possible to maintain authority while acknowledging that one might have been unaware of a particulate set of facts or perspectives. This is a task easier said than done, but I believe it is of central importance to the endeavor of modeling critical thinking.

Finally, I recommend the book, *An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments*,[5] which provides a very clear, cogent—and humorous—discussion of logical fallacies and how to overcome them. I also discuss my approach to critical thinking in Western's 2016 Innovative Teaching Showcase.[6]

The political polarization in the United States is a product of the intersection of a number of different factors, including the media, socioeconomic inequality, and the two-party system. As educators, I believe it is our responsibility and duty to try to

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[4] Biswas and Deylami, 2017, p. 1011.
[5] Almossawi, Ali. 2014. *An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments.* New York: The Experiment.
[6] http://cii.wwu.edu/showcase2016/biswas/index.html.

address this polarization within the scope of the resources we have. We may not be able to stem the larger factors that are causing the problems in our current political environment, but we can develop for ourselves and our students the tools needed to navigate—and hopefully improve—this terrain.

Competing Interests

I certify that I, as the sole author of this article, have no competing interests in the writing or publication of this article.