“How should we foster safe and brave spaces for connecting across divides?”

Deliberative Conversation Guiding Document

By:

Davionne Garrett (Wabash College), Chase Breaux (Wabash College),
Adam Brookman (Wabash College), Jonathan Silva (Wabash College),
Dr. Rhianna Rogers (RAND CAREP), & Dr. Sara Drury (Wabash College)

The inability to have conversations across differences has impacted the everyday lives of people. Lack of understanding and intentional efforts to not learn from those who are different have contributed to feeling things cannot change.

In response, RAND and Wabash College Democracy and Public Discourse (WDPD), aims to move the dialogue forward on the topic of bridging our differences in a Deliberative Conversation titled, "How can we create brave spaces for connecting across divides?"

What is a deliberative conversation?

Deliberative conversations are an effort to increase cultural awareness, interaction, and discussion among students, faculty, and staff around difficult topics. The uniqueness of the Deliberative Conversations format is that it is meant to intentionally bring together individuals who represent diverse perspectives around a topic; sometimes tricky or controversial, to advocate for tangible, joint solutions that give a voice to all invested in the conversation. Deliberative conversations first frame an issue for discussion by exploring it from multiple perspectives. Then, small groups engage several questions designed to deepen understanding, provoke new consideration, and weigh potential tensions in the issue. In the end, each group should emerge with a greater understanding of the issue and decide what should be done.¹

The term deliberative conversation has connections across culture. Deliberative conversations are called a variety of names, including deliberation, deliberative mini-publics, charettes, deliberative polling, intergroup dialogue, and public conversations.² Deliberative conversations are globally used, with examples as diverse as participatory budgeting in Brazil where we see a

deliberation about participatory budgeting,\(^3\) Citizens’ Assemblies in Ireland,\(^4\) and calls for Citizens’ Councils in Europe.\(^5\) While deliberation takes places in many different places across the world, there are still places where conversations across divides do not take place, and individuals have difficulties working through differences.

**Our challenges to have conversations across differences**

Politics in the United States is an example of how individuals have challenges to have conversations across differences. In the last 25 years, Democrats and Republicans have grown increasingly hostile toward one another; in fact, Pew researchers note that members of each party feel their opponents “are so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being” (Pew, 2014). These tensions have been growing over the last decade. We have chosen not to learn from others and bridge our cultural differences. Take a more contemporary issue, like politics today. In a survey by the Pew Research Center, 45% of American adults have stopped talking about politics with others.\(^6\) That is nearly half of our adult population that will not have conversations across differences. Furthering these divides are growing inequalities on both the individual and structural planes. While community members may feel individual inequalities, these inequalities often reflect structural challenges based on a lack of equity. Such “structural inequities are the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic drivers—such as, racism, sexism, classism, able-ism, xenophobia, and homophobia” that can challenge any of our institutional structures, from health to education\(^7\) Structural inequities have afflicted our country, leaving a long, complicated past to be understood today.

This issue begs the question, how have we come to this point? Have we always had issues in having conversations across differences? How can our challenges to communicate across differences might allow for increased polarization, distrust, and anger?

**Increased polarization, distrust, and anger**

Feelings of increased polarization have grown over time in the United States, and with it come anger and resentment—to our neighbors and our government. The “negativity” of recent elections “was not a sudden development,” notes Steven W. Webster, but rather gradual escalations. This corresponded with a “declining trust in government and a weakening commitment to democratic norms.”\(^8\) With these conditions, individuals may struggle to have productive conversations and have the feeling that things cannot change no matter how hard they

---


try. People start to distrust their neighbors, their community, and their government. Webster explains, “Specifically, higher levels of anger is associated with the belief that people in government are crooked, that public officials do not care what people think, and that citizens have no say in what government does.”

Public trust in government is at tremendously low levels: according to Pew Research, just 2% of Americans trust their government to do what is right “just about always” and only 22% trust their government to do what is right “most of the time.”

Our lack of trust leaves many with the pessimistic feeling that nothing can be done to change our circumstances.

**Problems that impact productive conversation: implicit bias & cancel culture**

Beyond our distrust of one another and government, we also struggle to overcome our ingrained perspectives. This condition often referred to as implicit bias, is the tendency of stereotype-confirming thoughts to pass spontaneously through our minds is what psychologists call implicit bias. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Psychology, “research on ‘implicit bias’ suggests that people can act on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes without intending to do so.” Implicit bias impacts productive conversation because it sets people up to overgeneralize, sometimes leading to discrimination even when people feel they are being fair. This can not only lead to less productive conversations but also tension in the space.

Another issue that acts as a barrier to productive conversation is “cancel culture.” Cancel culture emerged from the term “canceled” on Black Twitter in 2018, and according to New York Times reporter Jonah E. Bromwich (2020):

> “began to be used more widely to describe a dynamic frequently playing out on social media. A person would say or do something that was offensive to others, and those people would call out the offender. … People tend to see cancellation as either wholly good—there are consequences for saying or doing racist, bigoted or otherwise untenable things—or wholly bad, in that people can lose their reputations or in some cases their jobs, all because a mob has taken undue offense to a clumsy or out-of-context remark.”

Cancel culture can act as a barrier to productive conversations due to causing people to be wary of what they say due to the fear of being a target of cancel culture. Cancel culture may create some individuals feeling targeted and left out of conversations due to their beliefs, actions, or statements causing a backlash from a group.

How can we learn from one another, and share opposing viewpoints if we walk on egg shells while engaging in conversation?

---


Safe and Brave Spaces for Connection and Conversation

In response to the challenges of connecting across differences, we can create productive spaces for engagement. Two potential frameworks for productive connection are safe and brave spaces. Safe spaces are spaces where individuals can feel safe from identity-based discrimination, criticism, and other harm. Brave spaces are spaces where individuals of all races, sexes, genders, abilities, immigration status, and lived experiences can have difficult but productive conversations while maintaining the integrity of the group and have the opportunity to learn, share, and grow as individuals.

Safe and brave spaces each have their potential benefits and tradeoffs, and it is up to each of us to decide what sort of space can create pathways for greater inclusion and connection to move forward.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages of Safe Spaces</th>
<th>Tradeoffs of Safe Spaces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• People might feel validation/healing</td>
<td>• It can limit free speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• People feel like they can speak their mind</td>
<td>• It allows for echo chambers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• People in marginalized communities can experience a sense of belonging</td>
<td>• Some viewed as limiting growth/development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There is no burden to educate in safe spaces</td>
<td>• It can be seen as exclusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• People in marginalized communities feel safe from identity-based discrimination, criticism, and other harm</td>
<td>• It acts as an environment cancel culture to thrive without any challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It allows for a space of empowerment and respect for people in marginalized communities</td>
<td>• Some might see that safety cannot be guaranteed in a safe space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Could bring together like-minded groups</td>
<td>• This leads to like-minded groupings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Community members in Crawfordsville, Indiana, gather for an outdoor deliberative conversation on diversity and inclusion, sponsored by Wabash Democracy & Public Discourse.
### Questions for the Deliberative Conversation

1. Definitions: What is your definition of a safe space? What is your definition of a brave space?

2. What are the benefits of transitioning from safe spaces to brave spaces?

3. Do you believe that brave spaces allow us to have better conversations? Why or why not?

4. What do you perceive are the inhibitors of participation in safe and brave spaces?

5. What roles do inequity (e.g., cancel culture, implicit bias, and structural inequities) play in people's decision to enter safe or brave spaces?

6. What sorts of spaces would foster conversations across divides in your community?

7. Should we adopt brave spaces? Should we adopt safe spaces? Should we have both of them?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages of Brave Spaces</th>
<th>Tradeoffs of Brave Spaces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Some viewed as the catalyst for growth</td>
<td>• Historically underrepresented communities may see every space as a brave space due to the risks of speaking out, so calling a space “brave” is redundant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It is inclusive</td>
<td>• It might allow marginalized communities to have the burden to educate others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hold individuals accountable, i.e., implicit bias</td>
<td>• It might create disingenuous conversations due to the possibilities of being confronted for your ideologies, views, and statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Foster an exchange for ideas, and can act as a marketplace for more ideas, and more speech</td>
<td>• People may feel empowered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• People may feel empowered</td>
<td>• People feel like they can speak their mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• People feel like they can speak their mind</td>
<td>• It forces us to step outside of likeminded settings and engage with individuals from diverse perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It forces us to step outside of likeminded settings and engage with individuals from diverse perspectives</td>
<td>• Historically underrepresented communities may see every space as a brave space due to the risks of speaking out, so calling a space “brave” is redundant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Historically underrepresented communities may see every space as a brave space due to the risks of speaking out, so calling a space “brave” is redundant</td>
<td>• It might allow marginalized communities to have the burden to educate others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It might create disingenuous conversations due to the possibilities of being confronted for your ideologies, views, and statements</td>
<td>• Poorly organized brave space could cause count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Historically underrepresented communities may see every space as a brave space due to the risks of speaking out, so calling a space “brave” is redundant</td>
<td>• Marginalized communities can view every space like a brave space, so it is beneficial to have dedicated spaces to feel safe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>