FLIPPING THE SCRIPT AND PUTTING STUDENTS AT THE FOREFRONT OF CULTURAL CHANGE THROUGH "FOR STUDENTS, BY STUDENTS" DIALOGUES

Heidi Gailor, William Peace University
Carolyn Nye, William Peace University
Betty Witcher, William Peace University
Jennifer Blush, William Peace University
Kristin Koch, William Peace University

While critical reflection on controversial topics was once a celebrated component of academic life, in today's polarized political environment, faculty, staff, and students often shy away from contentious topics at the cost of student growth and learning. In 2020, a small university in the southeast launched a dialogue program, now entitled "For Students, By Students" dialogues under the premise that by launching a student-led dialogue program that encouraged students to hold dialogues on topics of their choice while creating enough structure to attend to participants' psychological-safety, the students would be better prepared to share feelings and experiences; listen to diverse perspectives; step away from polarities, discover innovative solutions; and engage in group meaning-making that supports a culture of equity, inclusion, and belonging. The response to the dialogues has been largely positive, and this article shares both information about the "For Students, By Students" dialogue program, as well as lessons learned.

Colleges and universities historically have been institutions where discourse over controversial issues has been encouraged, places where students learned to critically evaluate ideas from a variety of viewpoints. In fact, exploring opposing points of view was seen as a cornerstone strategy for high-quality education (Clark & Avery, 2016). A recent survey suggests that current college students feel reluctant to discuss controversial topics (Welding, 2024). One third of college students report having experienced free-speech limitations on campus (Bryant, 2024). Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) argue that "avoiding discussion of controversial topics in U.S. classrooms deprives students of an important part of their learning" (p. 8). However, as a more diverse cohort of students enter university, the opportunity for exposure to new and different ideas expands, some of which may challenge students' core beliefs. In tandem, a parallel process of political polarization has occurred across the world, which has made those engaged in public discourse uncompromising, undermining trust in institutions (Tornberg et al., 2021). The authors argue that students' reticence to discuss controversial topics can be reduced by creating psychological safety, while examining controversial topics. One mechanism for doing so is to engage students in dialogue, a facilitated group process where students create shared meaning by carefully listening

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to one another's stories and experiences in a community setting with ground rules to ensure an environment of social support.

David Bohm (1996) suggests that dialogue is a win-win form of communication focused on shared meaning, while typical discussions are more competitive, with some ideas and perspectives winning over others. Psychological safety provides a belief that interpersonal risk-taking is safe (Edmondson, 1999). Edmondson and Lei (2014) further suggest that psychological safety is a feeling that one won't face negative interpersonal consequences (e.g., rejection) and instead can connect in a way that enhances learning. In interpersonal settings (e.g., workplaces, school), the safest option is to either remain silent or to parrot comments others have stated. Taking a position can leave one open to a variety of forms of social rejection from gossip to ridicule to social exclusion. Research on norm violators finds that using social rejection to force conformity is a common strategy to maintain and benefit the larger group (Rudert et al., 2023). On a milder level, people may simply be motivated to get along and avoid hurting the feelings of others by making contradictory statements.

The need for psychological safety seems apparent – clearly individuals need to feel comfortable in the spaces they inhabit. However, there are specific outcomes in which individuals and organizations benefit from those feelings of safety. When workplaces are psychologically safe, employees have higher performance due to feeling free to request help or express opinions that supervisors may not agree with. For example, Ge (2020) found a direct link between psychological safety and work outcomes such as employee voice and higher work engagement. Interestingly, psychological safety often plays a mediating role in impacting voice or silence as opposed to a more direct role. Jabbar et al. (2023) found that psychological safety mediated the association between supportive leadership and voice behavior. Among teachers, psychological safety has been found to mediate the relationship between burnout and employee silence (Kassandrinou et al., 2023). Because psychological safety is tied to a fear of rejection and isolation, belonging is conceptually related. The authors argue that individuals who have greater feelings of belonging on their campus experience a greater sense of psychological safety. College students who report greater feelings of belonging are more likely to persist and ultimately graduate (Zosel, 2018) as well as experience greater enjoyment and involvement in classroom discussions and less sensitivities to peer judgment (Zengilowski et al., 2023). Belongingness allows students to trust that their classmates will respect their opinions and not reject them for having an opposing point of view.

The creation of psychological safety within groups is determined by the leader of the group. Within athletic teams, athletes whose coaches were more nurturing as opposed to controlling reported higher feelings of psychological safety (Senel et al., 2024). Within work organizations having inclusive leaders has been associated with greater psychological safety (Woods et al., 2024). Similarly, Wanless (2016) suggests that psychological safety can be created in classrooms when instructors show increased empathy and create environments where students build positive relationships. These actions may enable students to engage in risky behaviors such as discussing controversial topics. As this previous research indicates, leader behaviors are important to creating feelings of safety. All too often as instructors create discussion opportunities, they allow for open discussions with little guidance. The authors advocate for the need for the more structured process

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that dialogue provides to increase students' sense of belonging which ultimately should allow them to feel greater freedom to express their opinions, ideas, and insights.

According to Zosel (2018) the use of dialogues enhances belonging, while teaching participants how to manage conflicts when discussing controversial topics. Longo & Shaffer (2019) highlight the importance of university students engaging in dialogue and other modes of collaborative communication to build the capacity for diverse citizens to work together to solve the myriad of problems facing society. With these ends in mind, Honors faculty and staff centered student-led dialogue in the Honors Program starting in 2020. By facilitating and participating in dialogues, Honors students will be better prepared to share feelings and experiences; listen to diverse perspectives; step away from polarities; discover innovative solutions; and engage in group meaning-making that supports a culture of equity, inclusion, and belonging. To further support the sense of belonging, the dialogue work uses a peer mentoring framework for both dialogue facilitator training and dialogue leadership because participating in peer mentoring programs correlates with belonging, social integration, and academic success among first-year college students (Jeanmougin et al., 2024; Leidenfrost et al., 2014; and Venegas-Muggli et al., 2023). To further the sense of belonging, maintaining student ownership over the dialogue process and its outcomes creates a greater sense of psychological ownership for the initiative and commitment to its outcomes (Pierce et al., 2015).

Introducing Dialogue into the Honors Program

At a small southeastern, comprehensive university with fewer than 1000 students, the Honors Program includes about 15% of the entire student population. Students apply for the Honors Program after admission into the university and are selected based on high school academic performance and a history of engaged campus leadership or service. On average, students join the Honors Program with an unweighted high school GPA of 3.75. The 14-credit-hour Honors Program is grounded in the university's culture of immersive learning, offers students opportunities to develop as scholars and community change-agents with its focus on ethical leadership, critically thinking about justice, community connections, and service.

In the fall of 2020, the first-year Honors course, HON 100: Investigating Ethical Leadership, was designed to focus on ethical leadership, dialogue, and peacebuilding. A key component within the redesigned course is facilitating a dialogue program, which the authors now call "For Students, By Students" dialogues. Since the program's inception in 2020, Honors students have hosted 23 dialogues with about 24 participants at each. It is estimated that approximately half the students at the college have participated in one or more dialogues.

The dialogue initiative has two primary goals. The first goal is for students to understand and engage in different modes of discourse. Every Honors student learns how dialogue, discussion, and debate differ; participates in each mode of discourse; and learns how to facilitate dialogue using a formal dialogue method. The second goal is to support students as they build the skills to have honest conversations across differences in the service of participatory democracy.

About the "For Students, By Students" Dialogue Program

From 2020-2022, the authors used publicly available scripts for the dialogues. However, the students wanted the freedom to focus on topics more relevant to their lives. Given this feedback,

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the authors launched "For Students, By Students" dialogues and developed a set of templates for the students during the 2023-2024 academic year. Using our L.E.A.R.N. dialogue templates and question prompts, the students can create meaningful dialogues on topics that interest them in less than an hour (Gailor & Tyler, 2024). Since these dialogues are being facilitated by first-year students new to dialogue, the authors believe it is essential to allow students the freedom to pursue their interests while creating a structure to support each dialogue's success. Various topics have been explored such as "Is cancel culture good for society?;" "How has ChatGPT changed the university experience?;" and "Should teachers carry guns."

During the 2023-2024 academic year, the first year of the "For Students, By Students Dialogues," the students wrote and facilitated six dialogues using our templates and training materials. Each of these one-hour dialogues was built using our L.E.A.R.N. dialogue process (see Table 1), which includes five phases.

Table 1

L.E.A.R.N Dialogue Process

Phase	Purpose and Activities
1. Launch	• Explanation how dialogue is unique • Brief introduction of the dialogue topic • Agreement for C.A.R.I.N.G. communication (Communication that prioritizes Curiosity about differences, Appreciation for all community members, Respect for each person's ability to grow, Interpersonal awareness, careful listening with the goal of Networked meaning, and a Guarantee of confidentiality.)
2. Explore	• Gain a better understanding of the topic and comfort with dialogue • Develop a deeper understanding of the topic by examining an artifact (e.g., video clip, an editorial, or another student-generated piece of related media)
3. Acknowledge	• Build self-awareness and social awareness • Reflect on their experiences and perspectives related to the core topic
4. Reflect	• Reflect on possible actions they can take based on the core topic

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Phase	Purpose and Activities
5. Notice	• Notice how, as a community, they interacted during this dialogue and consider how they can use the dialogue process in other contexts

(Gailor & Tyler, 2024)

A Mentoring Model to Train Dialogue Facilitators

Critical to the success of "For Students, By Students" dialogues is a peer mentoring model built into HON 100. Upper-level Honors students with experience with dialogue work directly with the first-year students, who work in teams of five to prepare for and implement a "For Students, By Students" dialogue for the campus and the local community.

Before each dialogue, the new facilitators participate in two one-hour dialogue training sessions facilitated by the peer mentors. Before starting this training, students take the United States Institute of Peace's "Designing Community-Based Dialogue: Micro-Course," a free resource that introduces its audience to dialogue and how it transforms conflicts and builds peace (Milofsky & Barth, n.d.). During training session one, students become familiar with the differences between dialogue, discussion, and debate before participating in their first dialogue. During the second training session, students are introduced to the L.E.A.R.N. dialogue process and begin working in their dialogue teams. Each team of four to five students is responsible for hosting a dialogue with the support of their peer mentor. Over the next month, each team works directly with their mentor to develop a dialogue script, promote their dialogue, and practice facilitating it. During the actual dialogue, the students' peer mentor is present to support the facilitators' success. Following the dialogues, the peer mentors gather feedback from both the dialogue facilitators in the form of written reflections and an evaluation form completed by participants.

Measures and Outcomes

The evaluation form filled out by participants was a short, anonymous online survey. The form asked participants to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: “The dialogue experience was a positive one”; “I would consider participating in another dialogue”; “Following this dialogue, I feel more connected to those who shared in this dialogue experience”; “Following this dialogue, I feel a greater sense of belonging within this campus community”. Responses were rated on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) scale.

IRB approval was obtained to use the following data for publication. Anonymous survey responses were collected from a total of 47 participants in the spring of 2024. Responses revealed that overall students felt that the experience was a positive one. This held true for students participating in a dialogue for the first time, and for those who had previous experience with dialogues. Results further suggest that the dialogues created a sense of connectedness to other participants and an increased sense of belongingness to the campus community. See Table 2 for a summary of all questions.

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Table 2

Average Responses Across Questions

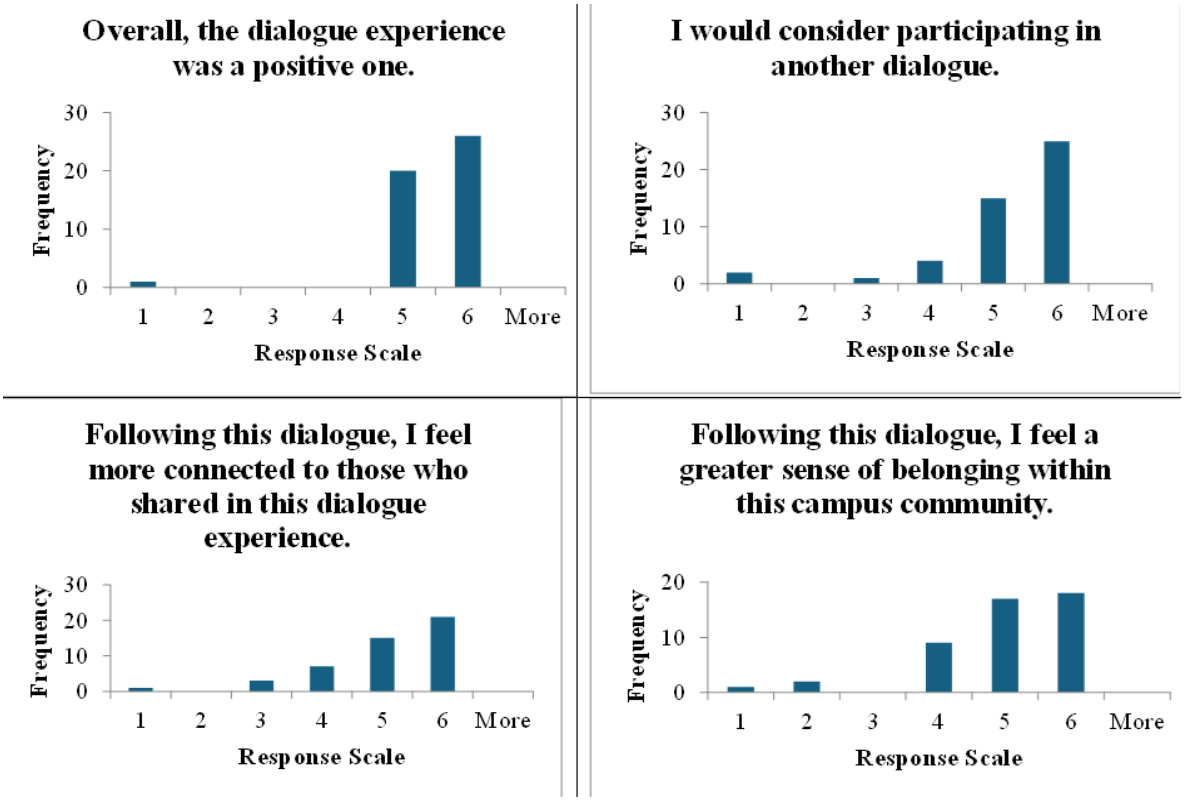
	Overall, the dialogue experience was a positive one.	I would consider participating in another dialogue.	Following this dialogue, I feel more connected to those who shared in this dialogue experience.	Following this dialogue, I feel a greater sense of belonging within this campus community.
Overall	5.47 (.83)	5.23 (1.16)	5.09 (1.09)	4.98 (1.15)
First time	5.50 (1.15)	5.20 (1.32)	4.95 (1.43)	4.85 (1.43)
Repeat	5.44 (.51)	5.26 (1.06)	5.19 (.79)	5.07 (.92)

Note. Standard deviation is included in parentheses.

The distribution of ratings shows consistency in responses to the four assessment questions (see Figure 1). For first-timers, participation was a course requirement. For repeat participants, it may or may not have been voluntary. However, a correlation of only 0.18 indicates that there is no relationship between the number of times participating in a dialogue and the average responses of participants across questions, which suggests there is no indication of a self-selection bias in the findings.

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Figure 1 Distributions of responses across questions.



Finally, the authors analyzed whether the dialogue topic influenced results; 95% confidence intervals were run on each of the six topics, and no significant differences were detected. Therefore, the structure of the dialogues results in similarly positive ratings, regardless of dialogue topic.

In addition to the evaluation form, first-year Honors students also completed reflection papers. Several representative quotes from the reflection papers follow. One student wrote, “Dialogue is important because it is a form of peacebuilding through communication. It allows for others' perspectives to be told in an environment that is non-judgemental.” In another reflection, a student wrote, "Facilitating a dialogue was an enlightening experience. It taught me how to lead a conversation in a peaceful manner while listening to other people's perspectives." Finally, a student wrote, "I felt that it was a very open and supportive place for people to give input without feeling like they will be judged in any way. I also enjoyed hearing different perspectives and learning new insights that I most likely wouldn’t have become knowledgeable of otherwise.”

Reflections and Recommendations for Other Campuses

Currently, first-year Honors students continue to facilitate "For Students, By Students" dialogues using our L.E.A.R.N. dialogue process. While the authors had great success launching our dialogue process through the curricular space, it can easily be replicated in the co-curricular realm. Student governments hosting town hall forums or civic engagement offices hosting dialogues can all use this method to empower students to lead their peers in a psychologically-safe environment and

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productively engage with controversial topics. For institutions looking to bring this framework to their campus, the authors have several recommendations for how to utilize the process.

First, we put intentional effort into the training of the student facilitators. The authors learned that it was necessary to teach students about dialogue conceptually, but it was equally important to show them how dialogue should be done. Students in training to be facilitators take an online dialogue course, participate in a peer-led dialogue, participate in classroom dialogue training led by peer mentors, and complete a full dress rehearsal of the dialogue they will be charged with facilitating. To utilize the "For Students, By Students" method to its full capacity, it's important to ensure student leaders are properly trained and confident before hosting their first dialogue.

Another key component regarding training was the peer-mentor model. The upper-level Honors students trained the first-year Honors students and also supported them as they navigated the dialogue project, which proved to be extremely helpful. This peer-to-peer learning helped the underclassmen feel more confident in their skills as facilitators, and the peer mentors grew in their confidence as campus leaders and incorporated dialogue work into other areas of campus life. On other campuses, a good starting point would be to train the first cohort of students on this dialogue process, and in future semesters, bring them back to serve as mentors for the new student leaders. This offers a new opportunity for returning leaders to dig deeper into their leadership development by coaching the next generation of dialogue leaders.

Another recommendation for implementing our L.E.A.R.N. dialogue process is to create structured buy-in to the program when it is first launched. A great deal of our success was due to the fact that going through dialogue training and becoming a facilitator was a requirement for incoming Honors students. The students had to garner participation from the larger university community as a component of their grade, which motivated them to host successful dialogues. In the co-curricular space, a way to create structured buy-in to the program is to make hosting a dialogue part of a student's position description. In a civic engagement office, this could be a requirement of student workers that would be hired. For student organizations, a dialogue could be included during Student Organization Officer Training workshops; officers can participate in a dialogue during training and then receive a toolbox for how to implement their own dialogues. Incorporating the L.E.A.R.N. dialogue process into the positions or programs that are already created would be a way to get the "For Students, By Students" model off the ground on other campuses.

If getting a group of people in the same physical space is a concern, it should be noted that the dialogue process can be successfully utilized in a virtual environment as well. For dialogues that were hosted virtually, there were even parents living in other countries that participated. This offers an opportunity for a greater reach to those outside the physical campus community, and this may fit the needs of some campuses better than an in-person environment. While some students reflected on preferring in-person dialogues, this process can work for virtual campuses or those with large online student populations.

In today's polarized environment, it is important that students are equipped to engage with contentious topics, share their experiences, and listen to diverse perspectives. The structure provided by the L.E.A.R.N. dialogue process was also critical to creating increased feelings of belonging and connectedness that students needed before they could engage, learn, and grow in the dialogue groups. As this dialogue model is implemented on other campuses, remember that

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this is "For Students, by Students" for a reason. Peer-to-peer learning and development was critical for the success and buy-in of this program. The authors encourage campus staff and faculty to flip the script and put students at the forefront of creating cultural change through dialogue to help depolarize campus conversations and promote psychological safety.

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