Discovering Civil Discourse: Using the Online Public Sphere for Authentic Assessment

Courses: Argumentation, Computer Mediated Communication, Critical and Cultural Theory, Online Journalism, Persuasion, Public Opinion, Rhetoric and the Internet

Objectives: Students will recognize Habermas’s public sphere theory and analyze public deliberation occurring within the online public sphere. After completing this activity, students will also be able to distinguish between civil and uncivil comments that people use in online forums. Finally, students will construct civil comments in an online public forum.
Rationale

In June 2013 Texas Senator Wendy Davis argued against a restrictive abortion bill. Davis encouraged dialogue about the legislation tweeting that “The leadership may not want to listen to TX women, but they will have to listen to me. I intend to filibuster this bill” (Long filibuster against Texas abortion limits suspended, 2013). Thousands of Americans employed civil and uncivil discourse to voice their opinions on the bill via news outlets’ websites by leaving comments in various online forms. Consequently, passionate Americans used the online public sphere to engage in public deliberation. Using Texas’ controversial anti-abortion bill debate, we ask students to analyze and discuss contentious material posted online; through this activity, students will comprehend Habermas’s (1991) public sphere theory and identify civil discourse occurring within the online public sphere.

Mezirow (2000) encourages instructors to design coursework that challenges students to examine numerous perspectives. To answer this call, we created an activity that asks students to read and discuss online public forums. In turn, students learn how to evaluate a writer’s use of civil discourse. In our activity, students learn that uncivil discourse contains vulgarity, provokes prejudice, exhibits gender bias, uses stereotypes, or pinpoints scapegoats. Conversely, a person using civil discourse is respectful and wants to understand another’s perspective. Our teaching activity increases “student awareness about participation in civil, robust, and effective public discourse” (Gayle, 2004, p. 175), which has important implications for our civil society. We believe that by teaching students about how to use online public forums appropriately and effectively, we are strengthening the online public sphere. Although we chose abortion as our topic, instructors can use any controversial topic that elicits civil and uncivil discourse. By
selecting a current event as a class, instructors also help students become more cognizant of and engaged in political events.

Because Habermas’s (1991) public sphere theory expounds on democratic deliberation, the theory is a model that instructors can use to teach students about public discourse and democratic decision-making. Habermas views the public sphere as an opportunity for individuals to freely share their views with one another, question any claims, and form public opinion. Citizen’s expression of public opinion, in turn, checks the state’s power. Habermas’s theory relies on the transmission of arguments through written conversation, such as print media and oral conversation occurring in coffee shops, and by extension, the college classroom. Although Habermas’s conceptualization of the public sphere has flaws, the notion of the public sphere remains important (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002), because the ideal public sphere encourages rational-critical debate (Breese, 2011). In our activity, students use online forums to engage in rational-critical debate by assessing others’ comments and discussing controversial issues using civil discourse.

The Internet allows people to remain knowledgeable about controversial issues and express their opinions; however, the online public sphere, as is the case with the abortion debate in Texas, is full of aggressive and inflammatory rhetoric. Online communication may meet Habermas’s (1991) criteria of the public sphere, yet the Internet occasionally falls short of being a space for rational and civil discussions. People who engage in online debates are sometimes self-motivated and discussions may be accessible to only a small number of people (Papacharissi, 2002). Our unit activity teaches students to examine a debatable issue from multiple perspectives and communicate their opinions civically, and in turn, strengthen the
online public sphere’s integrity. Civil discourse supports the societal good and demands that speakers respect one another (Teaching Tolerance, n.d.).

In our essay, we also offer formative, summative, and authentic assessment suggestions that help teachers effectively measure how well students understand the public sphere and civil discourse. Formative assessment, according to Black, Wilson, and Yao (2011), facilitates “learning by providing information to be used as feedback, by teachers and by their students, in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the learning and teaching ideas in which they are engaged” (p. 74). During our activity, the instructor assesses students in the form of oral dialogue. We use formative assessment activities, assignments, and feedback to help students who engage in uncivil discourse online to change their communication choices to reflect Habermas’s (1991) public sphere theory. Whereas formative assessment is assessment for learning, summative assessment is assessment of learning. When students partake in the formative exercise prior to the summative assessment, they have a better understanding of the performance expectations of participating in and writing civil discourse. In turn, teachers help students identify the gap between their current and desired summative performance (Nolen, 2011). In addition, authentic learning involves “engaging and worthy problems or questions of importance, in which students must use knowledge to fashion performances effectively and creatively” (Wiggins, 1993, p. 229). Our unit activity also employs authentic assessment because students deconstruct and examine real world comments.

**Activity**

Depending on the course and instructor preference, the activity typically requires two or three 50-minute class sessions. Prior to the first day’s discussion, the instructor should assign a reading that explains the art of civil discourse and ask students to explore a controversial topic.
The instructor should then spend one class period explaining Habermas’s (1991) public sphere theory and civil discourse. Students spend the following day(s) analyzing online discourse while completing the three-step activity. We developed a worksheet that guides the class discussion (see appendix for discussion worksheet).

**Step 1: Lesson on Habermas’s public sphere and civil discourse**

1. Introduce and explain Habermas’s (1991) public sphere theory and civil discourse.

2. Ask students to first identify how a person’s socioeconomic status is disregarded/displayed in online public forums. Then, using the selected topic, discuss how communicators use online forums to review issues of common concern. Critics of Habermas’s theory argue that marginalized groups are excluded from the public sphere (see discussions in Calhoun, 1992); therefore, students should discuss inclusivity – which people are left out of the online discussion?

3. Using the chosen topic, the instructor asks students about the effect that polarized thinking, which “leads to false dichotomies that label two sides and give the appearance of deeper division that might actually exist” (Gayle, Martin, Mann, & Chouser, 2002, p. 4), has on Habermas’s ideal public sphere.

4. As a class, devise a definition of civil discourse by listing words that students deem as civil and uncivil. Provide students with a scholarly definition of civil discourse and tie the definition to students’ understanding of the public sphere.

5. Instructors should outline the difference between denotative and connotative meaning. A word’s connotative meaning goes beyond the linguistic meaning and allows humans, “to communicate emotional and other experiential aspects of our perceived world” (Clore &
Ortony, 2000, p. 52). Students should identify feelings that may arise when someone uses a particular word.

**Step 2: Formative Assessment - Communication forum activity**

1. Ask students to bring in 3-4 online news articles about the selected controversial topic, with at least 2-3 pages of people’s comments, per article. Alternatively, the instructor can provide students with copies of the material.

2. Divide students into groups of four, give students discussion questions (see appendix for discussion questions), and ask students to answer the discussion questions while keeping in mind the comments from the public forums.

3. After each group completes the worksheet, they should write one example of civil and uncivil discourse on the board. Then, students should circle the uncivil or civil words.

4. In a round robin fashion, each group presents their findings and explains their reasoning.

**Step 3: Summative Assessment - Discussion board activity**

1. The instructor can expand this activity to include a summative authentic assessment activity by posting controversial discussion board questions to a learning management platform (D2L, Blackboard, Moodle, etc.). This final step allows students to participate in a simulated online forum.

**Debriefing**

Students should be able to recognize that participants in online public forums sometimes lack inclusivity and use uncivil discourse. Students admit that online public forums occasionally lack rational discussion and may not meet Habermas’s public sphere theory. In fact, students are often shocked by comments that people post throughout the online forums. Students easily identify language associated with uncivil behavior, but grapple with finding civil discourse. For
instance, students recognize the comments, “Republicans are morons. Pure and simple” and “Tom is willfully dumb” (Tumulty & Smith, 2013) as uncivil. Students engage in audience analysis as they recognize feelings that arise when communicators use a particular word. Consequently, students understand online commentators’ emotional responses to civil and uncivil language and begin to identify civil language. Given the importance of civil discourse in creating respectful public deliberation, instructors should spend an ample amount of time discussing what constitutes civil discourse.

Instructors can measure students’ comprehension of civil discourse and the public sphere throughout the duration of the activity. During the communication forum activity, we found that learners struggled to list words associated with civility; however, during the discussion board activity students incorporated civil language into their online discussion board forum. For instance, one student wrote, “I appreciate your perspective. While I agree that legislators have a right to pass policies that their voters want, I think that women should be able to make their own health decisions.” Additionally, students demonstrated their understanding of Habermas’s public sphere theory while distinguishing between civil and uncivil comments. Students recognized that vulgar language, such as cursing and name calling, is uncivil discourse and that points of agreement and inclusive language are characteristics of civil discourse. Finally, most students successfully fulfilled the unit’s primary learning objective by constructing civil comments; for example, one student stated, “Although, I disagree with your position on abortion, I do agree with your position on the filibuster.” As a result of participating in this active learning exercise, students spent more time evaluating messages prior to responding to online comments.

**Appraisal**

Our activity is highly adaptable to various class sizes and debate subjects, and requires
that instructors use minimal materials. Additionally, depending on interest or allotted class time, educators can expand or modify this activity by encouraging students to identify and discuss comments that exhibit the use of Aristotle’s ethos, pathos, and logos persuasive methods. Therefore, students are able to construct quality arguments that are tailored to their intended receivers and develop awareness of how people receive and interpret persuasive messages. Instructors can also expand students’ discussion of polarized thinking by asking them to examine how civil discourse generates both/and responses versus uncivil discourse that creates either/or reactions (see Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). Consequently, students learn both/and logic, create connections between evidence and the audience, and understand how to investigate an issue from multiple perspectives.

The Internet is ripe with instances of citizens discussing contemporary issues. Commentary about Texas’ strict abortion legislation is just one example of how online discussion platforms evoke heated reactions. In an effort to increase America’s civil discourse, instructors can use the Internet as an available and familiar tool to teach students about civil discussion occurring within the online public sphere. While learning about the public sphere and civil discourse, students acquire skills that enable them to communicate rationally. Learning activities, such as this one, teach students how to measure the supporting material’s strength, identify another person’s stance, and encourage discussion of alternative perspectives. As a result, our activity encourages students to evaluate each other’s communication strategies while simultaneously engaging in civil discourse in a twenty-first century online public sphere.
References


Appendix
Discussion Questions

Public Sphere
Familiarize yourself with the public forum comments. Place an X next to comments that evoke hostile language.

1. Choosing one page of comments, identify each person’s stance on the issue. How did the person discuss alternative perspectives?
2. How can those responding enact civil communication?
3. How has the Internet reinvigorated the public sphere?

Now, as a group ...

(Un)Civil Discourse

1. Identify two comments that use uncivil discourse. List the comments below. Underline the words that you perceive as uncivil. Write one of your examples on the board.
2. Why are these words uncivil?
3. List one of the words you underlined and describe the connotative meaning of the word. What emotions are associated with the word?
4. Using one of the examples, rewrite the comment using civil discourse.

Civil Discourse

1. Identify two comments that use civil discourse. List the two comments below. Underline the words that you perceived as civil. Write one example on the board.
2. Why does your group the the words are civil?
3. List one of the words you underlined and describe the connotative meaning of the word. What emotions are associated with the word?