

Ep. 014: Civil Talk in Uncivil Times

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This the description paragraph that can be found on the P This political season, and particularly the race for the White House, has injected an unprecedented amount of uncivil language and behavior to the national discussion. No matter who wins the November elections, it is unlikely to change anytime soon. How do you encourage students to discuss such shocking incivility in a civil way? This week, we sit down with [Dr. Steve Hunt](#), director of the School of Communication, to discuss strategies for exploring these important topics in class while avoiding hostility and ill will. We also explore how these discussions might impact your end-of-semester student feedback.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim,

STEVE: and this is Steve.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee. Joining me today is Dr. Steve Hunt. He's Director of the School of Communication here at Illinois State. Hi, Steve.

STEVE: Hello. It's great to be with you today. Jim,

JIM: It is so good to have you here. I've wanted to have you on since we started this a few months ago. And it is the perfect season to have you on given your background and your expertise. Because today, we want to talk about discussions in our class about this election season, and just how hard it is and how to have a civil conversation about some really uncivil speech.

STEVE: Yeah, it's been a pretty amazing election season so far.

JIM: So, your background, of course, is that you've done a lot with political communication, you've done a lot with the basic speech course that we offer here on on campus. So, that idea of thinking critically about speech and critically about media. Before we get into the classroom, though, can you just give me your perspective, let's kind of frame the issue a little bit. How is the speech change? And I think at some point, we're gonna have to talk about social media. Yeah. And how has that impacted it?

STEVE: Right? This election cycle is very different from previous election cycles that I've experienced. And I think if you talk to many communication scholars and and scholars of political science, they would tell you the same thing. One significant change is the way we approach and talk about what constitutes credibility within the context of a presidential election. Because in the past, we used to put a lot of in really kind of privilege experience in the political realm and previous offices held in the preparation that one had to assume the mantle of the head of the most powerful government in the world. And obviously, this year, that has changed significantly, at least on one side of the aisle, that what determines credibility seems to be the opposite of all of that, yeah, that if you're an outsider that if you haven't been involved in the system in the

past, maybe then that person is more credible. So, the way that we're approaching the cycle in terms of how each side determines which candidate is the most credible is a significant change from what we've seen in the past.

JIM: And so because it is such a 180 degree change, has that somehow opened up the discussion for all of these, all of this language that we hear and all of the personal the vilification of each candidate and some just some of the shocking language?

STEVE: Right, yeah, the whole. And I think it's, I think we sowed the seeds for this going back into 2008. And you saw what Sarah Palin was able to do to speak to a certain segment of the Republican base. And you saw the anger that some of those folks had about John McCain's approach and his unwillingness to unleash that kind of verbal aggressiveness against Barack Obama. Well, we have it now. Yeah, we had a candidate that is more than willing to engage in that kind of conversation, that kind of discourse. And it's something that his base in particular seems really drawn to, and you hear people talk about how he speaks in a language that they very easily understand. Well, that's easy to understand. But it's also maybe not great for our political discourse, at least from some perspectives. It's pretty toxic at times.

JIM: So, I think toxic is the right word. I've heard people say toxic. I've heard people talk about vitriol, rancor, all of this passionate, very fundamental emotion. That's the very ugly emotion that seems to be coming out. Talk a little bit about social media and how that how that affects people's willingness to go there.

STEVE: Right. So, one thing if we would, there's a lot that we can talk about this afternoon in terms of how social media has impacted communication. But one way that it really significantly impacts our understanding of communication in the way that it functions is the scale of it. Right. And the speed is another thing. So, anywhere in the world, that you're connected to the internet, you can make a comment, you can get involved in a conversation that can spread to a lot of people in a very short amount of time. And that skill, and that speed dramatically changes political discourse. And also you've seen in this race, a candidate and Donald Trump who has been able to utilize social media very effectively, right? When he tweets something out, we've been following his conversations in our social media analytics command center, it goes to 30-minute million people immediately immediately goes to that many people and then his followers retweet that and he's built up a pretty significant base in social media so it spreads to millions and millions and millions of people. And you haven't seen at least especially through the primaries and early on in the in the presidential race, him rely on traditional mass media as much the money going to fund traditional political advertisements and so on. He was rolling on free media and he was rolling on social media, and that's a game changer.

JIM: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And then I think so bringing this, that's kind of the, the high-altitude view of what's happening.

STEVE: Sure.

JIM: And I should say, we're recording this on the last Friday of October. We're going to try to release this early the next week. So, about a week until the election happens. And as

we were kind of talking, before we started recording today, there's really no sign that the, the quality or the tenor of the political discussion in our country is going to get any better post-election no matter who wins,

STEVE: right? No, it's and it's probably not going to get better. We are so polarized as a country now, not that we haven't been in our history before. Certainly, we have been. But we were certainly at a time in, you know, we talked about differences between this election cycle and previous election cycles. Here we have a mainstream, we have a Republican nominee who is attacking not only the Democratic Party, right, but also the Republican Party and the institution as a whole. So, that's something that's different. And that's not going to change.

JIM: In some ways, our classrooms on the on the university level, are one of the last sort of villages that we have, everything else is mediated now. And so, so much of our political conversation, we don't have town hall meetings, or as much anymore, and whatnot. And so for students who are in class, there is a certain, you know, there's a certain ease about how you talk about this stuff, when it is you have the anonymity of media involved. And so all of a sudden, we're face to face with people. So, bringing this into the classroom now, now that we've gotten kind of the high-altitude view. If you're an instructor, and you know, regardless of your discipline, I suspect your students are thinking about this or that or it's going to come up at some point. So, how do you frame structure? Control? Moderate? I'm not sure what the right word is even. But how do you foster this sort of conversation? If you think it's important to your students into into the learning without offending people and without, without getting making people very upset?

STEVE: That's a good question. And you know, we mentioned at the top of this, that we really want to talk about this in a way that instructors in a wide variety of disciplines can relate to so in the communication discipline, pick a class, there's going to be discussion of political issues, right. That's just a part of our discipline. But I would imagine that in a lot of other disciplines, the nature of this race being what it is, is making its way into conversations in our class, for sure. So, my thing is, and I really wanted to teach the class that I'm teaching this semester, this semester, because it aligned with the presidential election cycle. And I'm teaching a class and persuasion, I start on day one, talking with students about the ground rules for the conversations that we're going to have, you know, that we're going to be respectful of each other's opinions that we're going to consider multiple opinions and sometimes the stuff that what makes its way into the classroom. And and there's a very intentional link to what's happening in the political environment in this class. But what makes its way into the classroom is going to be controversial. Now, and we're not all going to have the same opinion about the kinds of things that we talked about. But we have to agree at the outset that we're going to do so in a very respectful kind of way. And I think, if you can work with students to establish this is the way the class is going to run and set the tone from the beginning of the semester that can go a long way to helping facilitate the conversations later.

JIM: Do you think that that also could have some value? If all of a sudden, you're talking about this, and you didn't even expect to talk about it? So, you didn't really lay the

groundwork at the beginning of the semester? You can still, it's okay to Yeah, you can frame that sentence to set the ground rules to some to some extent,

STEVE: Absolutely. Yeah, you can set those ground rules. And I also think it's I think it's important for faculty, or instructors to model pro social communication behaviors for their students, we know, the research tells us very clearly that students are likely to engage in the same kind of communication behaviors that we engage with towards them. So, pro social communication behaviors beget pro social communication behaviors, anti-social communication behaviors beget antisocial. So, approach the class and communicate with the class in a pro social kind of way. Be respectful yourself, and you will invite that respect back.

JIM: Can you give me some examples of some of the ground rules in particular that you have? You've discussed with your students?

STEVE: Absolutely, yeah. When I'm asking questions, I'm trying to avoid asking leading questions. I'm really asking questions that allow for them to take the perspective that they want to take, first of all, so from my perspective, I think part of what we what we need to do is faculty when we're talking about controversial issues, or leading dialogues on difficult topics is to monitor our own behaviors and our own communication behaviors in the way that we approach things. But it as a class when we are engaging in conversation, don't create a hostile environment, right? Don't attack. Don't use ad hominem attacks, don't engage in verbally aggressive behaviors against each other, be more supportive, be supportive, verbally in what you do and nonverbal in what you do.

JIM: And that's difficult, I think, because to some extent, I mean, it is okay, first of all, I have in my experience found that students behave more civilly when they can see each other. So, there isn't that mediated barrier. So, there is a natural sort of civil conduct that happens. But having said that, we are asking them to behave in ways different than what they're seeing everywhere else. And we are, you know, in, you know, we always talk about sports metaphors when we're talking about or the horse race when we're talking about elections. There is there is so much brinkmanship and gamesmanship involved with it. That could be I suspect, a little bit more of a challenge than

STEVE: It can be. But I think the other thing about that is some of the behaviors that we see in these presidential elections gives us an opportunity as faculty to say, hey, maybe, maybe, maybe what we ought to do is be thinking more critically about the issues that we deal with on a daily basis and communicate more competently about those issues. So, it may be it provides that opportunity as well. Yeah, yeah. But what you mentioned about the physical arrangement of the classroom, or the instructional setting that we're in is very important. So, we you mentioned decreasing barriers, there's a construct and communication we study called immediacy. And, and immediacy basically refers to the behaviors that we engage in that decrease physical or psychological space between us and our students. So, we think about the traditional classroom instead of rows and banks of seats, if we can arrange those in circles, where we can see each other and maintain eye contact, monitor nonverbal behavior in an

easier kind of way. I think you're right, that that could go a long way towards encouraging civility.

JIM: I heard something very interesting, a few days ago, a conversation not on a radio program. And I think it is true to some extent that some people can take an insistence upon civility, as an attempt by someone with one view, an opposing view to silence. There are so when you do have someone who is expressing these very controversial views in a class, and you're concerned, because you don't want other students to be harmed by that. How do you step in? How do you how do you? We've talked about setting the ground rules, how do you adjust to address people's behavior in the situation?

STEVE: Setting the ground rules that you mentioned early on, not just talking about, hey, here's how we're going to structure discussions and we want you to be respectful of other people's perspectives and all of that, that's great. That is, but also teaching them.

JIM: Right.

STEVE: How they how you expect them to communicate and think about things in the classroom. When we're together. We're going to talk to each other in these kinds of ways. So, you're right, this civility can be used as a tool to oppress to marginalize certain perspectives. But I think if we think about this in terms of argumentativeness, and verbal aggression, I've, I've thrown verbal aggression out there several times. I haven't defined it yet. Yeah, go ahead, please. So, in our discipline, we tend to approach argumentation as a very positive kind of thing outside of our discipline, it sometimes gets a bad rap. Right, right. Oh, that's just argument. But argumentation for us is really a desire to engage in constructive pro social discussions in a very critical kind of way, building arguments, developing claims, supporting them with evidence. That's what we mean by argumentation. That's what we try to teach. verbal aggression is usually the tactic that students and others will engage in, when they don't have argument, argumentative skills when they don't know how to develop an effective argument. So, those are mal additions. Those are at home attacks, that's calling people names that's putting people down. And the intent is to make other people feel bad, right? So, verbal aggression is the bad kind of communication behavior that we don't want to have. argumentation is much more pro social. So, I think you can be civil and develop an argument on multiple perspectives. I think what we want to shy away from is that verbal aggression, that's when we start to get into trouble.

JIM: One of the problems that we're facing in this political climate is not only the fact that there's a lot of incivility, but there are also a lot of stupid arguments being made a lot of factless arguments being made. And they get masked by the showmanship by the by the sizzle, right, that we don't look at the substance of it.

STEVE: Right. And that's part of what I when I referenced how we define credibility earlier. Yeah, that's part of the changing nature, I think for some audiences, at least of what we mean by credibility. So, credibility now, for some anyway, not for everybody, but for some is, can I understand what they're saying? Does the person speak to me in a language that is easily accessible? Right, right. Are they entertaining? Right? Instead of

are they competent? Do they have the, the kind of pedigree and the background and the experiences to do I relate to them? And can I understand them? And are they fun to be a part of right? And that changing nature of credibility is, has worked its way into different bases of work for the candidate, right?

JIM: How now you've done a lot on this campus in terms of civic engagement. So, I wanted to ask you, you know, I remember being a 20 something, or 18. Actually, I was 18 that year and I my first Presidential election, I was able to vote, and I was so thrilled I turned 18 in August. And I really, you know, and I was an aspiring young journalist by that point already. So, I felt like, you know, I was exercising my franchise, I would hate to have this be my first election to vote in. How do you get students to be or remain engaged in our society? In this in this horrible field of context?

STEVE: Yeah, you know, we are the other thing that we didn't mention, one of the big differences between this election cycle and previous cycles is that we have two candidates that have the highest negativity ratings of any candidates in history, right? So, instead of having that I see a lot of frustration that maybe there's not something out there for us to vote for. Yeah, right, that there's something to vote against. And that creates a climate that makes it difficult to energize people about being excited to participate in our political system. But if we have any hope of avoiding this in the future, and my real hope is that we will return to more normal communication patterns and future presidential election cycles. If we have any hope of doing that. It's going to be this generation of millennials right now that look at what's going on and say, we demand it to be something different moving forward, we want to see good arguments being presented don't want to see verbal aggression and home attacks constantly. And it's not about who can entertain, and it's not about who had the best reality television show. But really, who is the most competent to lead us?

JIM: Right. And I think and I think to achieve that, it requires all of us, regardless of what discipline we're teaching in, to really try to encourage good argumentation when we discuss anything, anything right, you know, whether it's political or not,

STEVE: What, regardless of what discipline you're in, you're all trying to teach students how to grapple with the issues in the discipline in an effective, competent kind of way, how to think critically through the issues that are related to that discipline. So, yeah, we got all embrace this task at Illinois State.

JIM: Yeah. So, one final question today. And I'd like to approach this from a different perspective. And I don't mean to put you on the spot, because I know that as the Director of the School of Communication, as a chair of a department, you see those end of semester feedback, questionnaires that students fill out? What would you say to a faculty member, perhaps someone who hasn't achieved tenure yet? Or someone who's non tenure? Who is concerned about even approaching any of this in their class? Because they're afraid they're going to get dinged at the end of this?

STEVE: That is a great question. And I imagine that there are lots of faculty that are concerned for just that very reason that students are going to ding them at the end of the semester. But I'll tell you this, let me frame it this way. Okay. You mentioned my

connection to civic engagement. I've been involved with Illinois state's political engagement project, but our campus American Democracy Project, and I spent about 10 years doing that. And I mean, I still continue to support civic engagement to this day, obviously, but was formally involved before I assumed the Directorship of the School of Communication. And in that role, one of the first things that we were asked to do was to integrate the political engagement project in a Comm 110. So, check this out, everybody, you take everyone's favorite course, public speaking. Right? And now, right, because everybody loves public speaking, now throw a component a required component that we're going to do political engagement on top of that.

JIM: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I've done that. I've taught that class. Yeah. You have taught

STEVE: that class. So, yeah, we did assessment of that. And what we found was that the students we did we had a control group, we had experimental groups with the with a PEP sections, we found that at the end of the semester, the students in the PEP sections differed significantly from the control group sections on a battery of measures of political knowledge, political skill, political behavior, and things of that nature. But what's more interesting probably, is the the impact of their experience in those courses on their affect. So, I'm talking about do they like the teacher? Do they like the content of the course? And are they apt to engage in the behaviors recommended in the course, and the pep sections where they're having those discussions about political issues? Those sections were significantly higher than the control sections, they actually liked the content of the course better, they like the instructor better, and they had a more meaningful reported having a more meaningful experience. They're so instead of, you know, being in a classroom where they're giving speeches about the history of underwear, yeah, you know, and instead, maybe they're talking about genocide in Darfur war, or something like that. They're learning from each other from that they reported having a much more meaningful experience.

JIM: Okay. Steve, thank you so much for being here today. I appreciate

STEVE: It was a pleasure.

JIM: We'll have to do this again sometime.

STEVE: Absolutely.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about our podcast by going to our website, CTLT.IllinoisState.edu click on the podcast link up in the upper right-hand corner of the page. And by the way, you can also find us now on iTunes. So, seek us out there and give us a couple stars we appreciate it for Dr. Steve Hunt and everyone here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology until we talk again, Happy Teaching.