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8-1-2017

## Turning Division into Discourse: Educating Adolescents about Viewpoint Diversity

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Griffin, Erin McLaughlin, "Turning Division into Discourse: Educating Adolescents about Viewpoint Diversity" (2017). *Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) Capstone Projects*. 124.  
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## Abstract

In this time of increasing affective polarization in the United States and abroad, the importance of finding a positive path forward for political discourse cannot be understated. This capstone project is focused on the creation of a secondary educational curriculum aimed at cultivating viewpoint diversity. This proposed Viewpoint Diversity Curriculum (VDC) is intended to be a primer for high school students to enable them to engage in civil discussions and to elect (and become) knowledgeable and attuned leaders in their democracy. By using constructs such as intellectual humility, growth mindset, and actively open-minded thinking, the research presented here draws heavily on positive psychology literature to review each specific objective of the VDC. Ultimately, the goal is not to promote a particular value system, but to teach students skills of self-awareness with the intent of making them much more critically aware that other people matter, and their views and values matter, too.

## Keywords

viewpoint diversity, secondary education curriculum, positive political discourse, intellectual humility, actively open-minded thinking, positive psychology, positive education, moral foundations theory, political polarization

## Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement | Curriculum and Instruction | Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Educational Leadership | Educational Methods | Politics and Social Change | Secondary Education

RUNNING HEAD: TURNING DIVISION INTO DISCOURSE

Turning Division into Discourse:  
Educating Adolescents about Viewpoint Diversity

Erin McLaughlin Griffin  
University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Jonathan Haidt

1 August 2017

Turning Division into Discourse:  
Educating Adolescents about Viewpoint Diversity

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Capstone Project  
Master of Applied Positive Psychology  
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1 August 2017

*“The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most slow-witted man if he has not formed any idea of them already; but the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of a doubt, what is laid before him.”* -Leo Tolstoy (1894)

### Abstract

In this time of increasing affective polarization in the United States and abroad, the importance of finding a positive path forward for political discourse cannot be understated. This capstone project is focused on the creation of a secondary educational curriculum aimed at cultivating viewpoint diversity. This proposed Viewpoint Diversity Curriculum (VDC) is intended to be a primer for high school students to enable them to engage in civil discussions and to elect (and become) knowledgeable and attuned leaders in their democracy. By using constructs such as intellectual humility, growth mindset, and actively open-minded thinking, the research presented here draws heavily on positive psychology literature to review each specific objective of the VDC. Ultimately, the goal is not to promote a particular value system, but to teach students skills of self-awareness with the intent of making them much more critically aware that other people matter, and their views and values matter, too.

*Keywords: viewpoint diversity, secondary education curriculum, positive political discourse, intellectual humility, actively open-minded thinking, positive psychology, positive education, moral foundations theory, political polarization*

### Turning Division into Discourse: Educating Adolescents about Viewpoint Diversity

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, Americans are left to grapple with a number of troubling realities—but perhaps most troubling of all is the fact that we cannot even agree on what those realities are. In a time of political polarization stronger than any seen since the Civil War, when us-versus-them ideology is fueling a fire that rages out of control, people are quick to point fingers. Perhaps now it is time to revisit the old adage about pointing a finger at another only to find three fingers of one's own hand implicating the real problem. This is as it should be, for when it comes to placing blame for the decline of political discourse in this country today, it falls squarely on the shoulders of the people who are most likely to be reading this paper. It's our fault—academics, administrators, leaders, concerned citizens, people who want to change the world. Our views of co-partisans or like-minded people are increasingly positive as our views of those on the other side of the political spectrum become increasingly negative (Pew Research Center, 2014). As we descend into this world of hyper-partisan politics, convincing ourselves that others pose a grave threat to our nation, we continue to bear down on a fractured system with all the weight of self-righteousness, self-importance, and irate indignation.

This capstone project presents a resource that just might help to make things better. It's a project to foster respect for viewpoint diversity within secondary educational institutions in order to create a path for positive political discourse. Chris Peterson (2006) offered a famous elucidation of positive psychology in just three simple words: other people matter. That concept is a crux of this capstone. The Viewpoint Diversity Curriculum (VDC) is intended to be a primer for high school students to enable them to

elect (and become) leaders in a society that is riven by political polarization, confusion, and mistrust. It enables adolescents to see that other people matter, even when they are on the other side. This curriculum has three objectives:

- 1.) To increase self-awareness and knowledge of the American political spectrum, so that students better understand themselves and their country.
- 2.) To cultivate intellectual humility, so that students recognize that their worldview is not complete and is likely biased, and that others have much to teach them.
- 3.) To develop actively open-minded thinking (AOT) skills, so that students can converse with, learn from, and debate those whose viewpoints differ from their own.

The goal of viewpoint diversity is not to promote a particular value system, but to teach students skills that will allow them to evaluate, consider, and understand the values and opinions of others while forming and enriching their own. The VDC draws heavily on positive psychology research to support its objectives and its methodology.

This paper will deal explicitly with the ways that application of the principles of positive psychology can promote well-being in communities and institutions that will help our democracy flourish. More specifically, it will outline curriculum objectives for secondary educational institutions to encourage positive political discourse, and it will offer insight on pedagogical approaches as well as a week's worth of detailed lesson plans to serve as an example of implementation in a specific secondary content area (See Appendix B). (I will also be developing a semester's worth of teaching lessons as I use the VDC in my own teaching during the upcoming academic year.)

### **Preventing Political Polarization: How Positive Psychology Can Help**

The increase in political polarization, in the United States and in many other democracies, has created problems that can perhaps be remediated with applied positive psychology. We know that well-being can be taught, and we can even look to the small country of Bhutan to see how adopting well-being as a measurable goal can lead to the development of better public policy (Ura & Galay, 2004). We must, however, acknowledge that building social cohesiveness in a place like The United States of America is far different from doing it in Bhutan, which has an extremely homogenous population of less than a million. The Gross National Happiness index, used to measure progress in Bhutan, demonstrates how the application of positive psychology can have a significant impact in the realm of community well-being. It includes nine domains of progress: health, time use, education, cultural resilience, living standards, ecological diversity, good governance, community vitality, and psychological well-being (Adler, 2015). But even before a discussion can be had regarding the value of these measures, let alone the value of measuring progress in such a way, principles of positive psychology need to be applied to create the conditions for such a discussion. Therefore, the most obvious place to begin to address questions and concerns regarding community well-being is in our educational institutions, with the aim of raising the level of political discourse by building social cohesiveness through encouraging viewpoint diversity.

In terms of building social cohesiveness, it makes sense to look at how we can begin to foster this kind of cooperation despite our diversity in our educational institutions. Positive psychology is often talked about at an individual level—something that has led to an unfortunate yet common misconception that it is truly just glorified self-

help. But while close attention to individual well-being can make us feel personally enlightened and empowered, the truth is that our general health is highly dependent on those people who surround us. Thus, while it is possible to cultivate well-being in the individual, the dyad, and the group, *optimal* well-being occurs when it can be fully realized on all three levels (Haidt, 2006). Of course, certain pedagogical methods already incorporate this concept through strategies such as cooperative and collaborative learning—schools are constantly emphasizing the fact that human beings are true team players; there is an understanding that people have to help each other, even when that means not helping themselves, in order to benefit the greater good of the group (Wilson & Wilson, 2007).

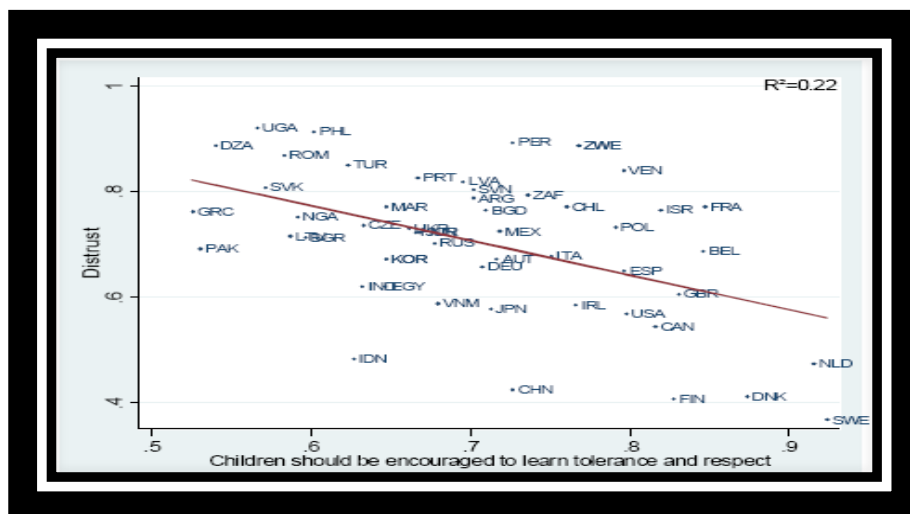
This concept of cooperation and self-sacrifice is one that underpins our democracy as well, and though it is clearly linked to morality, it is also implicit in our biology. We know from evolutionary psychology that adaptations at the group-level can be disadvantageous at the individual level. Evolutionary processes generally craft mental mechanisms that make people self-interested, but some argue that they have also crafted mental mechanisms that make us group-interested, or groupish (Haidt, 2012; Wilson & Wilson, 2007). In other words, our species became dominant in the world because we can and do function in coordinated groups. Groups matter to us. Chances are, if a person's social network isn't happy, then he or she won't be, either (Fowler & Christakis, 2009). Social support really does matter, because it helps us believe in ourselves more, which in turn helps us to achieve more (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). Even if love for all mankind is likely to be rare from an evolutionary perspective (Haidt, 2012), we *can* foster love within a group. Therefore, it makes sense that our educational institutions should do their



part to focus their diverse groups of students on the well-being of all community members. Our educational institutions rely on capitalistic ideology, trying to create equal opportunities and rewarding individual accomplishments—they are both democratic and meritocratic, but are they focused on building and investing in social capital? Educational institutions play an important role in the well-being of a community, and they should strive to balance the disparity between economic and noneconomic predictors of well-being.

Social capital is very important for the health of a democracy—people need to trust each other and their institutions, and political polarization destroys trust. Research shows that societies that have high levels of distrust generate more regulation and more corruption while also producing citizens who do not have the skills or even the motivation to break free from distrust (Aghion, Algan, Cahuc, & Shleifer, 2010). For example, a distrustful society is one in which parents are far less likely to teach their children the value of tolerating and respecting others:

*Figure 1: Correlation between country-share of distrust and parents teaching tolerance<sup>1</sup>.*

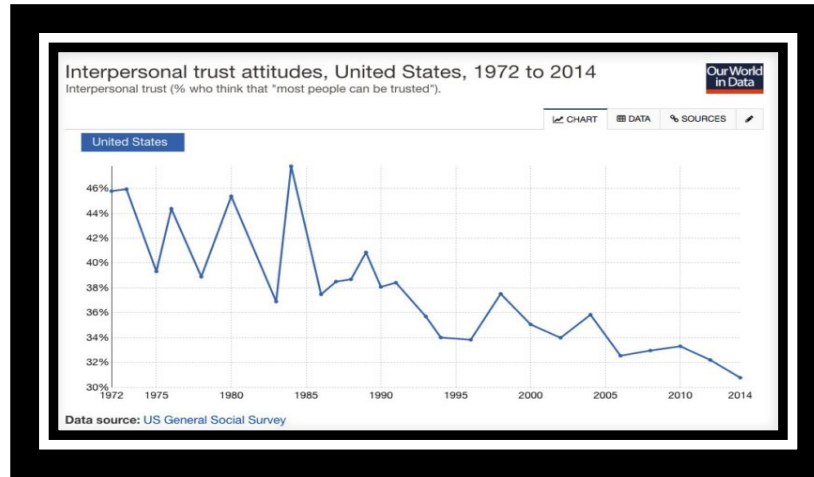


<sup>1</sup> Note: From “Regulation and distrust,” by Aghion et. al, 2010, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 125(3). Copyright 2010. Reprinted with permission.

Regardless of what is being used to measure progress and well-being, happiness or GDP, this does not bode well for the United States, where levels of trust are plummeting. The 2017 World Happiness Report concludes that the happiness is declining in America primarily as a result of social causes, not the economic ones that we so often look to for answers (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2017). Of crucial importance is the fact that generalized trust has been steadily falling for decades in America. While trust has fallen, perception of corruption has risen, and other forms of “us versus them” Manichaeism have taken root because of income and wealth inequality and deterioration of the US educational system—increasingly, polarization in America is between those who have a college degree and those who do not (Helliwell et al., 2017).

While economic output has steadily risen in the past several decades, life satisfaction has not—in fact, depression and distrust are much more prevalent today (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Evidence points to the reality that as societies become more wealthy, a shift occurs showing that differences in well-being are not dependent on income, but on factors such as satisfaction with work and our social relationships. Our wealth, or GDP, doesn’t tell the story of well-being for any nation that has already achieved a moderate level of prosperity:

Figure 2: Percentage of people in the US who agree that “most people” are trustworthy<sup>2</sup>.



Data supports the notion that more care should be given to fostering strong social relationships in communities, and that these relationships should be prioritized when creating policies for organizations, corporations, and government (Diener & Seligman, 2004). The nations who are highest in well-being are those democracies with strong and stable governments and societies rich in social capital. But how do we begin to strengthen the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society? America needs to focus on rebuilding social capital—highly diverse societies like Canada have done this through promoting cross-partisan understanding (Helliwell et al., 2017). Reason dictates that the obvious place for this kind of work is in our school systems, as a goal of American education has always been to educate children to be moral and respectful citizens (McClellan, 1999), and schools are important determinants of a child’s well-being (Helliwell et al., 2017). To help communities function effectively, positive psychology can play a pivotal role in our educational institutions by building social cohesiveness through teaching principles of viewpoint diversity.

<sup>2</sup> Note: In *Our World in Data*, retrieved July 5, 2017, from <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/trust-attitudes-in-the-us>. Copyright 2016 by General Social Survey. Reprinted with permission.

Teaching viewpoint diversity in secondary schools will create a path for positive political discourse on college campuses and in communities across the country. In paraphrasing Zen master Seng-ts'an, Jonathan Haidt (2008) emphasizes that the struggle between for and against is the mind's worst disease. Haidt (2012) points out the frustrating nature of moral and political arguments because the focus is on changing minds instead of on understanding opposing points of view; therefore, if we want to change others, we should first be willing to understand them, to consider the possibility that our way of seeing the world is not the only way, and that it may not be the right way. Thus, a VDC would have the objectives of increasing knowledge of the polarized American political spectrum (a prerequisite for understanding viewpoint diversity), cultivating self-awareness and intellectual humility (knowing our strengths and weaknesses, that we don't know everything, and we might, in fact, be wrong about what we believe), and teaching actively open-minded thinking (AOT) skills (actively looking for reasons other people's views differ from our own).

Although humans can be awful, selfish, intolerant hypocrites, we also have a unique and inspiring ability to cooperate with each other, and to transcend our own purpose for the greater good of society, and we hold each other accountable for that work (Haidt, 2012). This sense of collective purpose is one that should be fostered in our educational institutions in order to create the common bond that is necessary to allow for civil interaction and point everyone on a path toward truth (Haidt, 2012). The accountability aspect of such a community would manifest itself in a culture that resists the blindness of moral tribalism while strengthening its binding ties through this shared sense of purpose. Haidt (2016) says that the more people feel that they are the same, the

more they trust each other, and this trust is indubitably important for social cohesiveness. To this end, our entire society would benefit from secondary schools adopting a VDC that uses concepts such as moral frameworks and intellectual humility and skills such as AOT as a basis for understanding people with opposing perspectives. Again, the goal of this curriculum is not agreement or consensus, but understanding.

Most people accept and acknowledge that diversity is a good thing—but the final frontier of diversity seems to be viewpoint diversity. People need to be convinced that their way of seeing things is not *the only* way to see things. In terms of our American democracy, Haidt (2008) challenges us to see that liberals and conservatives each have a piece of the puzzle, that both groups are really perceptive about certain moral values, and both have an understanding of what it takes to have a humane and truly democratic society. As emerging voters, it's important that adolescents understand the roles that liberals and conservatives play in building social capital and social structures that actually do allow us to flourish—they must consider how fairness, harm, order, restrictions, and boundaries are important (Haidt, 2012). When people attempt to truly understand each other, when they have some intellectual humility and are willing to learn something from others who don't think the same way, and when they see humanity in someone that they disliked or demonized previously, amazing things can happen. By focusing on the positive, engaging others in a collective purpose, and fostering strong relationships, secondary education institutions can help students and teachers find meaning and accomplishment in building a society that promotes human flourishing. This is what it will take to foster civil discourse—and this is why positive psychology can help pave that pathway.

**Positive Institutions – Creating a Culture of Conscious Choice**

A positive institution is one that is strengths-based and has human flourishing as its aim; it focuses on the structures of relationships that lead to flourishing. When an educational institution commits to adopting and integrating a VDC into its programming, it could be considered a positive intervention for the entire organization. In order for positive interventions to be truly effective, they must promote the exercise of control over consciousness and build awareness of choice in constructing meaning from experience—these are goals that are compatible with the goals of education itself. Schools teach students the value of creating good habits. William James assures us that acquiring a new habit is simply the reprogramming of the brain; the plasticity of human physiology makes it possible for people to acquire new habits at will (James, 1984, p. 125-126). As new pathways are formed, it becomes easier to keep new habits. He echoes Aristotle's view of the importance of taking action, repeated action, in the formation of character—another goal of education. A VDC must include lessons on awareness and choice, and must habituate students to seeing things from different points of view.

James argues that it is not enough to dream or wish for change, but we must take every opportunity to act in order to affect our character for the better (1984, p. 136). In his "Gospel of Relaxation," James discusses the Lange-James Theory of reflexive emotion, asserting that we should mainly pay attention to what we do and express in situations, and not pay too much attention to our feelings. By controlling our own thoughts and actions, we can separate empathy from understanding. Empathetic responses are emotional responses, and while these can be strong and moving, they are not the kind of responses that change minds. We need intellectual engagement for that to

happen. This idea of action and awareness being more important than expression of emotion is key: by controlling action with willpower, we can control our emotions (James, 1983, p. 117). In this sense, the promotion of awareness and action becomes the ultimate form of character education. A VDC must also aim for self-directed, reasoned understanding in addition to empathic responses.

Positive institutions are those that pay attention to the concept of purpose, and the purpose of education should be to inform the way we think and behave. Consciousness, while a biological process, can be self-directed—we can *decide* how to act. This also means we can *learn* how to act, and self-directed action can be taught. We can order our consciousness to be in control of our thoughts and feelings; awareness is the key for the intentional ordering of information—if a person is aware of his or her desire or wishes, then these intentions act as the force that keep information ordered (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). It is within everyone's power to create his or her own reality—we really do get to choose what to pay attention to. Being able to control consciousness means being able to focus attention at will; it means not being distracted, and being able to concentrate for as long as necessary to achieve a goal—everything we are is shaped by how we use our attention (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

Since the self is at the center of all experience, it is exceptionally important to be able to use reason to understand perspectives other than our own. Writer David Foster Wallace cautions us about our “default setting...to be deeply and literally self-centered and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self;” we battle this default setting only through increasing our awareness and actively choosing how to construct meaning (Wallace, 2005). The mind is indeed an excellent servant, and a terrible master. A person

who exercises control over awareness, attention, and discipline can choose the good life—a life of flourishing. This is an essential teaching to ready students for Viewpoint Diversity.

### **The College Conundrum: How Secondary Schools Might Save Higher Ed**

Colleges in the United States are seeing a spike in mental health issues among students, and while it's difficult to know exactly why that is happening, it's fairly clear that the efforts of colleges to protect students' well-being is not the most effective route to flourishing. Rather than offering protection from an ever-expanding world of verbal threats, colleges need to promote positive discourse. Yet instead of working to increase students' self-awareness, awareness of others, and rhetorical resilience, colleges have designated "safe spaces" to insulate students in their own bubbles of cognitive bias. Instead of encouraging intellectual humility, colleges seem to be creating conditions that allow students merely to affirm what they already think they know. Instead of cultivating AOT skills, college campuses are seeing free speech shut down again and again. With trigger warnings, microaggression training, and safe spaces, colleges appear to be operating in the name of student well-being, but in reality, the exact opposite is happening—students are being taught a type of pathological thinking that promotes a kind of vindictive protectiveness (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). A college culture that eschews the Socratic method because it may cause discomfort, polices speech for the same reason, and then takes punitive measures to keep people in line is likely to cause anxiety and depression (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Things may get worse before they can get better, but there is a positive path forward, and secondary schools can help.



Trust issues abound in children born after 1980—a generation known as Millennials. They were raised with a consistent message that life is dangerous and that adults will protect them from all kinds of potential harm (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Part of this message manifests itself in affective political polarization—the US is now at a point where implicit bias is at least as strong across parties as it is across races (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014), leading to more hostility, self-righteousness, and allegiance to in-groups that interfere with well-reasoned thinking (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). The morality that binds us also blinds us (Haidt, 2012). In high school, adolescents need to learn how to perform well-reasoned thinking, and to do that they need to have a basic understanding of their own strengths and biases and a sense of intellectual humility. They can also begin good habit formation and character development through learning basic cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) skills that compliment actively open-minded thinking (AOT): Both CBT and AOT teach to value evidence over emotion, and both require skills to actively seek out and objectively evaluate evidence that contradicts an original hypothesis (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

Secondary schools must recognize that the VDC is complementary to their existing institutional goals while capitalizing on an opportunity to create servant-leaders in society at large. There is evidence to support that adolescents are ready to do the work that the VDC will require, including being capable of reflective judgment. King and Kitchener (2004) argue that reflective judgment requires abstract thinking, and relevant abstract thinking begins in adolescence. It is a skill that benefits from education and training, and the higher the level of education, the higher the proportion of an individual's reflective judgment (King & Kitchener, 2004). Furthermore, beginning in late

adolescence there is movement from a “an objectivist/absolutist/pre-reflective reasoning stance to a subjectivist/multiplist/quasi-reflective reasoning stance, culminating (in some) in a coordinated/evaluativist/reflective reasoning stance toward knowledge” and together with attitudes about knowledge acquisition (fixed or growth mindset), these factors will determine how students search for information and how they ultimately learn (Samuelson, Church, Jarvinen, & Paulus, 2015, pp. 80-81).

But perhaps the biggest role the VDC can play in high schools is in elevating students and staff alike by cultivating intellectual humility. Humility could be the gateway to intellectual growth, and is important for academic achievement, openness to viewpoint diversity, and even scientific discovery (Templeton, 1995; Rowatt et al., 2006). Intellectual humility has, in fact, been shown to boost student achievement by fostering motivation to learn (Porter, 2015; Briggs, 2016). Furthermore, it’s been associated with more engagement in high school students (Briggs, 2016). Intellectual humility teaches that it’s less important to look smart than it is to be smart. This is a key lesson for teenaged students who need to understand the difference between reputation and character. Furthermore, fostering these skills means that high schools can send forth to college students who are open to the idea of viewpoint diversity, because intellectual humility does not encourage intellectual homogeneity. True learning requires stepping out of comfort zones—it means personal growth, and growing pains are to be expected. The point of education is not to make the world conform to our ideas or desires, but to master our own ideas and desires so that we can better understand a complex and contradictory world—this is the aim of a real education: Choosing how to think so we can live more wisely.

### **Positive Political Discourse—The Creation of a Curriculum**

The challenge that educational institutions need to address is how positive political discourse in America can be cultivated in its classrooms and campuses. The primary goal of this review is to address a need for positive political discourse in our society with an empirically sound curriculum designed to teach viewpoint diversity to an adolescent population aged approximately 16-18 in a secondary school setting. Specifically, skills to be taught and practiced should meet the objectives of increasing awareness, fostering intellectual humility, and cultivating AOT skills. The secondary goal of this review is to explain how a targeted approach that is based on these objectives might help to promote an interest in and ability to understand diverse viewpoints. This multi-lesson, co-curricular educational program—the VDC—will measure specific outcomes in reasoning and behavior related to the skills listed above. The development of this curriculum will be intentionally designed in tandem with Heterodox Academy’s Viewpoint Diversity Experience, which is aimed at college students, and will be created with flexibility in mind so that it might be easily modified for a wider audience and a variety of applications. Sample lessons will be added to the appendix to show how the curriculum objectives can be integrated into the core curriculum of a high school class—specifically, they will showcase how the VDC works as it is adapted for an 11<sup>th</sup> grade English classroom in an independent college preparatory school.

**The Solution: Three Objectives to See Students through to a Better Future**

**Objective #1: Teaching awareness—other people matter.** The first goal of the VDC is to increase self-awareness and knowledge of the American political spectrum, so that students better understand themselves and their democracy so that they are better-informed citizens of this country.

The political prejudice occurring across the ideological spectrum in The United States and elsewhere—the prevailing “us versus them” mentality that is shaping so much of our social dynamics—is an example of an ancient tendency known as “Manichaeism” (Johnson et al., 2016). This moral philosophy was active between the third and eighth centuries and promoted a dualistic view that an individual acts in one of two ways, for good or for evil (Johnson et al., 2016, p. 9). This conceptual framework of absolute right and wrong helps explain the current polarization between “left” (liberals or progressives) and “right” (conservatives) in the US. Manichaeans strongly advocate for their own party’s moral values (their ingroup) while working to distance themselves from those held by the opposing party (their outgroup)—and this kind of moralistic hyper-partisanship appears to be roughly symmetrical; in other words, liberals and conservatives are not significantly different in their discriminatory behavior toward each other (Johnson et al., 2016). Moral diversity threatens people (Chambers, Schlenker, & Collisson, 2013; Haidt, Rosenberg, & Hom, 2003), and this feeling of danger or distrust can lead to intolerance of different viewpoints (Crawford & Pilanski, 2012; Johnson et al., 2016). Thus, in order to teach viewpoint diversity, the VDC must address the origins and

variations in moral reasoning, giving students a better understanding of moral foundations and the differences that occur between social classes, and political parties.

Studies show that shared moral values lead to higher rates of participation in politics across the spectrum and help people make meaning of their social structure, and political orientation can often be explained by moral constructs (Skitka, Morgan, & Wisneski, 2015; Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012; Miles & Vaisey, 2015). By appealing to shared moral values, teachers can show students how the primary concerns of liberals and conservatives may differ, but that together they form the building blocks of a stable democracy (Johnson et al., 2016). In other words, by emphasizing the fact that everyone has something to contribute, and by helping students capitalize on self-awareness through this self-affirmation, teachers may be able to help reduce defensive responses (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Critcher, Dunning, & Armor, 2010). Once this defensive response is neutralized, it's possible that the processing of opposing views may increase (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000). This simple shift in focus to what unites us (a shared set of moral values) from what divides us (the way we prioritize those values) represents a strengths-based approach in the spirit of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2005). Teachers can modify the constructionist principle, based on social construction theory, to explain to students that many things we believe to be true have been socially constructed; therefore, these beliefs or "truths" that are held are always open to interpretation and alteration (Gergen, 1999). When students have this awareness, they may be more willing to keep an open mind.

*Awareness of self: An essential understanding for viewpoint diversity.* At the ancient temple of Delphi, one of the maxims inscribed is "know thyself." It is a piece of

advice accepted and promoted by Socrates, who would argue how ridiculous it is for people to think they are capable of understanding abstract things before they know themselves, and his student Plato suggests that knowing one's self makes one more capable of understanding others. In this vein of thought, it is easy to see how awareness of one's own biases helps a person to understand how difficult it is to avoid biases in general and it may even motivate people to judge others less harshly while working to mitigate their own shortcomings (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). Most people need to overcome bias before they can even recognize it in themselves—this is called the “better than average” or “Lake Woebegone” effect, which acts as a type of bias blind-spot (Pronin et al., 2002, p. 376). This tendency to see bias in others rather than in one's self affects a person's ability to see things as they truly are. Until we recognize that our view of reality is distorted, we run the risk of continuing to think of ourselves, quite mistakenly, as objective individuals in a world full of biased others. This myopic view leads to misunderstanding as it allows people to deceive themselves into thinking others with whom they disagree are unreasonable (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). For this reason, it would help students to have some basic knowledge about their own cognitive processes and resulting biases.

People hold their experiences to be true—they erroneously believe that they perceive reality without any distortion, and this happens in part because the cognitive, motivational, and biochemical processes that influence us are not consciously experienced. There are a number of what are called “dual process” theories of human cognition that help to explain bias and human susceptibility to blind spots. While the theories differ in terminology, they all make a distinction between two types of thinking,

generally known as System 1 and System 2; whereas System 1 describes fast, automatic, and intuitive processes, and System 2 describes slow, deliberate, and analytic processes (Kahneman, 2011). System 1 is generally thought to work outside of conscious awareness (although its products often emerge into consciousness) while System 2 processing is mostly conscious, and so System 2 works as a sort of check on System 1, confirming intuitions when correct, and modifying or overriding them when biased or misguided (Evans, 2007).

System 1 thinking is so fast and automatic that it favors what is most readily accessible and most easily discerned, which is most often what one already believes, knows, and intuits (Pronin, Olivola, & Kennedy, 2007). This self-reliance can result in biased judgments including:

- Confirmation bias, where people seek confirmation for opinions and beliefs already held and ignore disconfirming evidence (Nickerson, 1998).
- Better-than-average effect (Alicke, 1985); also Lake Wobegone effect (Kruger, 1999)—In any given sample, subjects rate themselves above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in most dimensions of personality and behavior.
- Primacy bias, where people tend to believe what they hear first (Samuelson, Church, Jarvinen, & Paulus, 2015).

The problem occurs when System 1 processes are not sufficient and a person has to move from what one immediately knows, believes, or remembers to System 2, bringing more information into play—but System 2 is also prone to bias because of the sequential nature of its processing (Evans, 2007; Samuelson et al., 2015); we are able to use System 2 to reason out justifications for our System 1 responses. Still, it is System 1 thinking that

allows us to automatically put ourselves at the center of the universe, so to speak. It is the reason we are so apt to believe that our reality is representative of the reality of others (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Ross & Ward, 1996).

Intuitions and emotion inform even the most reasoned action; without emotion, our ability to reason is impaired, but without reason, emotion lacks clear direction (Samuelson et al., 2015). Emotions like disgust, anger, and fear can be disastrous to cognitive openness and rationality. It follows then that emotionally-charged topics, such as morality, religion, and politics, are often rife with bias and irrational patterns of thought. This means that the ordinary mechanics of human cognition may lead an individual to maintain a default position, refusing to attend to the ideas or arguments of another. Self-awareness is a core psychological process that is necessary for many kinds of goal-directed behavior (Leary & Guadagno, 2011); thus, it is important that students be made aware of the ways one's emotions can impact thinking, beliefs, and judgments (Samuelson et al., 2015). Acknowledging and accepting this human weakness is actually one of the first steps in a strengths-based approach to self-awareness that will lead to a greater awareness that other people matter.

***Awareness of others: Teaching students to take the generous view.*** Students of the VDC will come to understand that conservatives favor and promote binding morals like loyalty, authority, and purity; liberals focus more on morals associated with individuals, such as care and fairness (Haidt, 2012). Although it is important to understand that the two sides of the political spectrum disagree fundamentally about how these moral values should be prioritized and pursued, it is equally important to stress that both groups share these values to some extent (Johnson et al., 2016). Because people are



more likely to support causes that are framed in the context of being value congruent with their ideology, students may be more open to hearing both sides of an argument from two groups whose moral foundations at least seem familiar to them (Feinberg & Willer, 2015). For this purpose, teachers of the VDC will use Moral Foundations Theory as a framework (Haidt, 2012). If students can learn to attribute viewpoint diversity and bias to normal human psychological processes rather than demonizing those who think differently as immoral “others,” this would be a great step forward in the path of positive political discourse. Students would then be able to choose to take the generous view of other people with whom they disagree, and they would understand that they, too, are susceptible to the same biases as their adversaries (Pronin et al., 2002). Though we may not live in what Voltaire’s Pangloss absurdly describes as “the best of all possible worlds” in *Candide*, the VDC may make this world a bit better by providing important tools and skills for students—not only to cultivate their own intellectual gardens, but also to cross-pollinate with the intellectual gardens of others whose vistas may be vastly different.

**Objective #2: Cultivating intellectual humility—that’s right, we might be wrong.** The second goal of the VDC is to cultivate intellectual humility, so when students recognize that their worldview is not complete and is likely biased, they will understand that others have much to teach them and be more motivated to learn.

Humble people are self-aware and can perceive themselves and others clearly (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Chancellor and Lyubomirsky propose five observable hallmarks of humility: a secure, accepting identity, freedom from distortion, openness to new information, other-focus, and egalitarian beliefs (2013, p. 819). In a seminal study,

Tangney found that humble people remain open to discovering new insights about themselves and the world—they are both teachable and truth-seeking (2000).

Furthermore, the quality of humility has shown to reduce overly-partisan thinking (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000), and to heighten the ability to analyze issues based on their merits (Correll, Spencer, & Zanna, 2004). Humility may enhance the ability to learn from others who are different or to analyze alternative viewpoints (Stangor & Thompson, 2002). Intellectual humility is defined by understanding the limits of one's knowledge. It's about being open to new ideas and being willing to consider new sources of evidence; thus, people with intellectual humility are better learners and are better able to engage in civil discourse (Lamothe, 2017).

***Intellectual humility: Encouraging a growth mindset and motivation to learn.***

Studies suggest that intellectual humility is associated with openness during disagreement, and that fostering a growth mindset of intelligence may increase intellectual humility and its associated benefits (Porter & Schumann, 2016). Intellectual humility is linked to a love of learning, and the way a person thinks about intelligence—a fixed mindset versus a growth mindset—affects intellectual humility (Lamothe, 2017). If students can be taught to lean toward Carol Dweck's concept of a growth mindset, they will come to view intelligence as they might view a muscle—something that can be developed and strengthened, which can lead to resilience and a love of learning (Lamothe, 2017). Intellectual humility has also been correlated with wisdom, according to a study by researchers Ethan Kross and Igor Grossman (2012). In order to reach the kind of self-examination needed to foster wisdom, students must be able to check their “bias blind spot” and engage intellectually. Once students are taught that most people

tend to overestimate their intellectual strengths and underestimate their weaknesses, they can endeavor to become less afraid to admit or correct mistakes, and more open-minded to listen to all sides of an argument.

Tangney (2000) defines humility in two ways: a proper understanding of the self (accurate assessment, perspective, low self-focus) and a certain intellectual disposition (acknowledging mistakes and possessing intellectual openness). Knowing about cognitive biases makes it more likely that one would become intellectually humble, and as Samuelson et al. point out, the key to mitigating bias may be having what could be called the intellectually humble position of “a common interest in the truth” (2015, p. 29). Since Templeton (1995) found that humility could open the door to intellectual growth, it could be expected that there is a positive correlation between humility and academic achievement. Templeton (1995) theorized that humility acts as a gateway to understanding, and therefore could be important for academic achievement, perspective-taking, and even scientific discovery (Rowatt et al., 2006, p. 207). Recently, researchers found that intellectual humility is associated with more teacher-reported engagement, higher math grades and greater growth in math achievement among high school students (Porter, 2015). Perhaps most encouraging, however, is not the growth in adolescent achievement, but the change in motivation and character that appears to be linked with intellectual humility.

In recent studies, high school freshman and sophomores who were higher in intellectual humility were rated as being more admired, respected, and intelligent by their classmates—and they were considered to be more engaged in learning by their teachers (Briggs, 2016). The intellectually humble students also ended up earning higher grades,

but they cared more about learning; researchers believe their strong motivation to learn is what fueled their achievement (Porter, 2015). While achievement certainly matters, it seems exceptionally promising that intellectual humility may go beyond performance to foster something more like purpose—students who are intellectually humble have a more durable, adaptive motivation to learn (Dweck, 1999; Porter, 2015). This question of what motivates students to achieve is particularly interesting—if schools can foster a true love of learning in students, that is an achievement that extends beyond academic performance. Porter found that both types of motivation – “wanting to learn and wanting to look smarter than others” – boosted students’ grades, but caring mostly about looking smart can sabotage intellectual growth, particularly when students encounter challenging material (2015, p. 67). In this sense, perhaps intellectual humility can be seen as a kind of gracious grit—a pure source of personal perseverance to keep learning for learning’s sake.

*Intellectual humility: An educational path that stands to reason.* Humility is considered a character strength or virtue within the realm of positive psychology, indicating a person’s temperance and protecting against the vices of excess (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Positive associations of humility are intellectual openness and respectfulness of others, indicating less arrogance and egotism (Rowatt et al., 2006). Intellectual humility bears distinct relevance in the realm of education; for instance, it may foster study habits that promote learning, such as metacognitive reflection (King & Kitchener, 2004). King and Kitchener (2002) propose a three-level model of cognitive monitoring for older adolescents: cognition is the simple apprehension of evidence, then comes metacognition, or thinking about thinking; finally, there is epistemic cognition,

which is the contemplation of the limits of knowledge. Epistemic cognition allows people to consider “truth value” of proposed solutions to problems (Samuelson et al., p. 67). The process of developing intellectual humility can be defined by this movement from certainty to a more gradual process of reflective judgment. Students low in intellectual humility may not use metacognition much during the learning process because they may feel their current knowledge is sufficient (Porter, 2015, p. 61). There may also be students who are high in intellectual arrogance, who actually prefer themselves (consciously or unconsciously) as a primary source of information regardless of whether or not they know enough to make judgments that are congruent with facts (Samuelson et al., 2015). For this reason, it is important that a VDC includes lessons designed to reduce bias, teach reflective judgment, and promote “other-centered” thinking.

Samuelson et al. (2015) completed a review of literature that reveals several types of “other-centered” thinking as effective techniques for reducing biases: “a search for accuracy (representing reality that is shared by others), a need to be accountable for one’s judgments (to defend one’s thoughts to another), the use of rules of analysis (a process used by many others to arrive at a more consensual judgment), and exposure to differing perspectives (seeing things from another’s point of view)” (p. 27; King and Kitchener, 2004). The question is, what would motivate students to think in these ways? It is up to teachers to provide some of this motivation through thoughtful lessons. For instance, activities to develop reflective judgment should force students to examine their assumptions, analyze evidence from multiple sources and perspectives, and take responsibility for their own conclusions. Teachers might also do well to be cognizant of students’ capacity for intellectual humility when arranging group work, as research

indicates that intellectually humble students may be more willing to collaborate with their peers (Porter, 2015). Of course, much of this positing hinges on the question of motivation—what is it that makes some people more likely than others to be open to viewpoint diversity?

When motivated, most people are quite good at the task of evaluating the best argument, both at the individual and group level, but bias still plays a significant role unless it is *actively* mitigated. For example, when held accountable under time pressure, people exhibit the primacy bias, which means they tend to believe what they hear first (Kruglanski, Dechesne, Orehek, & Pierro, 2009; Samuelson et al., 2015). And when it comes to specific opinions and beliefs, not much is known about whether intellectual humility makes people more willing to be moved from their stances. Hoyle, Davisson, Diebels, and Leary (2016) make the conceptual distinction between general and specific intellectual humility to show that while some people may be intellectually humble, they still may be unwilling to consider specific views that call their own into question. It is important to recognize that, given the state of current research, intellectual humility does not shed much light on people's particular stances (Hoyle, Davisson, Diebels, & Leary, 2016). However, if the goal of education and the core of the VDC is to get as close to truth as possible, then one's willingness to change beliefs reflects this goal (Samuelson et al., 2015). There is a teachable reasoning method that encourages and develops this "other-centered" thinking, and it is called Actively Open-Minded Thinking (AOT).

**Objective #3: Developing actively open-minded thinking—understanding the other side.** The third goal of the VDC is to develop actively open-minded thinking (AOT) skills,

so that students can converse with, learn from, and debate those whose viewpoints differ from their own.

There is a difference between reflective thinking, discussed previously in this paper, and AOT. Reflective thinking has to do with dual-system cognition, and System 2 thinking can also be used to bolster initial conclusions even when they are completely incorrect (Baron, 2017). Although System 2 thinking does often correct errors, Haidt (2001) has argued that it also serves to bolster incorrect thinking about moral issues, justifying initial emotional responses instead of questioning them. Thus, Baron argues that dual-system theory is neutral in respect to AOT's most important feature—the direction and extent of thinking (2017). AOT is specifically intended as the antidote to myside bias, and Baron (1993) argues that it is important for two purposes: It is useful in reflectively formulating and achieving goals, and in helping to determine trustworthy sources. In a study by Stanovich and West (1997), those who scored highest on the AOT scale relied less on prior beliefs for the quality of their arguments, and their disposition to think openly and flexibly held steady even when researchers controlled for cognitive ability (Samuelson et al., 2015). It should be encouraging to teachers to know that although thinking dispositions function more like enduring traits, they are also considered teachable skills (Baron, 1993).

***AOT: Understanding the rationale for rational thought.*** Rationality, although it is at the core of making judgments and decisions, is rarely discussed in psychological literature; it is also not discussed much in education courses meant to prepare teachers for their careers. However, now more than ever, having an understanding of thinking is necessary to prepare citizens of a democracy who are finding themselves increasingly

guided by others—experts or otherwise—in order to discern truth (Baron, 1993). Baron (2009) points out that rationality is not the same thing as accuracy—a wrong answer can certainly be reached through a rational method, just as a person can think irrationally and be right. Good decisions do not always result in good outcomes, but good decision-making depends on people doing the best they can with what information is knowable (Baron, 2009). Furthermore, Baron (2009) argues that rational thinking helps people achieve their goals (the more goals, the better), and good thinking means thoroughly searching and considering possibilities. The real danger is not that people are apt to think too little, it is that they are apt to have great confidence in answers that were reached with little thinking (Baron, 2009). Studies have found that “asking people to consider the possibility that competing hypotheses are true is sufficient to undo the bias of one-sided thinking” (Samuelson et al., 2015, p. 31). But because people usually favor possibilities that are already strong, Baron (2009) argues that this bias must be countered by looking actively for other possibilities and evidence on the other side—this is known as *actively open-minded thinking* (AOT).

Rational thinking is not necessarily cold thinking—emotions are types of evidence that can help people achieve their goals, and though they can make people think irrationally, they can also assist in rational thinking (Baron, 2009). A common goal is to believe what is true, and Baron (2009) posits that thinking thoroughly and open-mindedly means looking for evidence against preferred beliefs in order to find true beliefs. True beliefs will lead people to make better decisions, thus making it more likely that people will achieve their goals (Baron, 2009). All people are susceptible to self-deception, but this is where basic awareness comes back into play; if students are taught about self-



awareness and bias through the VDC, they may be less likely to deceive themselves. As Baron (2009) points out, people who know that their thinking is poor will not believe their own results. Self-deception can be harmful because it can impede people's progress toward goals—they can fool themselves by working for the impossible or giving up on the challenging but attainable things in life. Baron (2009) refers to this kind of damaging self-deception as the “Pangloss effect,” so that again we see the influence of Voltaire's *Candide* and revisit the age-old philosophical argument that asks which should be trusted more, reason or observation? Voltaire would argue that good scientific reasoning is evidenced only when the two prove each other—otherwise, the truth has not yet been found. So what is one to do? Keep looking.

***AOT: Building on intellectual humility and growth mindset.*** Baron (2009) asserts that an open society depends on the teaching of rational thought. The VDC, in its attempt to help students understand the underpinnings of American democracy, must involve the practice of rational thought and the rejection of blind faith in authority (of self or others). A common theme about the role of motivation in de-biasing thought is that it has to be consciously practiced (Samuelson et al., 2015). Furthermore, one's attitude toward knowledge will make an impact on learning itself; Carol Dweck and her colleagues found a clear relationship between the motivation to learn and mindsets that intelligence is either fixed or capable of growth. Those with growth mindset persevere after failure and learn from mistakes (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Samuelson et al., 2015; Porter & Schumann, 2016). Not only that, but students benefit from growth mindset because it will prepare them for an attitude regarding the tentative nature of knowledge and the need to thoroughly evaluate evidence from as many angles as

possible. We also may be able to foster intellectual humility by helping people understand that intelligence is not a fixed asset, but something that can be developed throughout life (Porter & Schumann, 2016). As Samuelson et al. explain, “with the mechanism of development, one thing is clear; sophisticated epistemic beliefs that acknowledge the complexity and tentativeness of knowledge, that motivate a search for the best evidence to justify beliefs, that create a tolerance for alternative views, and that inspire a curiosity and a love of deep learning, arise from an encounter with knowledge through schooling” (p. 75).

It is clear that AOT can be taught, and that to some extent, culture and education may do this (Baron, 1993). In the realm of education, Perkins et al. (1986) taught high school students AOT through a 16-session course emphasizing thorough searches for arguments on both sides of an issue. Students were especially encouraged to look for arguments on the other side. The course nearly doubled the number of *otherside* arguments, and did not increase the number or quality of *myside* arguments—showing that the effect was a change in direction (Baron, 1993). In the vein of intellectual humility, and discussed here to illustrate how it might work in tandem with AOT, researchers found that asking adults to provide in-depth causal explanations led them to adopt more moderate political attitudes (Fernbach, Rogers, Fox, & Sloman, 2013). Both AOT and intellectual humility require an open and flexible thinking disposition with the capacity to weigh evidence for and against strongly held beliefs (Samuelson et al., 2015). Importantly, AOT can be successfully taught with explicit encouragement and direction, but not by simply requiring students to think (Baron, 1993). Thus it seems that inducing a

growth mindset and cultivating intellectual humility in students might help pave the way for the type of thinking needed to practice AOT.

Some practices known to foster a growth mindset of intelligence will also foster intellectual humility. Porter & Schumann (2016) found that such practices include the following:

- 1.) direct instruction to teach students that intelligence is malleable (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck 2007),
- 2.) praising students for effort rather than ability (Mueller & Dweck, 1998), and
- 3.) having educators who believe and act according to the belief that each student has intellectual potential (Dweck, 2010).

School cultures also matter, and those that value a love of learning over academic performance would also help foster the proper conditions for all the elements of the VDC—awareness, other-centeredness, intellectual humility, and openness conducive to AOT. Furthermore, school faculty can commit to the concept of intellectual humility, modeling it for students. Porter and Schumann (2016) suggests that schools in which faculty and staff readily acknowledge the limitations of their knowledge and their willingness to learn from others may encourage students to do so, as well. Intellectual humility might also be readily fostered through classroom activities that challenge students to respectfully consider dueling sides of contentious issues. Therefore, if we want to seriously address the need for viewpoint diversity and positive political discourse, we cannot focus only on our students' character, but we must also address the culture of our schools.

### **Discussion of the VDC: Character-Building for a Democracy**

Schools and society as a whole stand to benefit by shaping students to have a love of learning, an understanding of themselves and others, and a working knowledge of their democracy and their role within it. Since its inception, the American educational system has promoted character education generally revolving around moral values and encouraging or mandating participation in community service programs (Lickona & Davidson, 2005), but recently the focus has shifted to character traits more associated with performance, such as grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007) and self-control (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). While the VDC would cover aspects of moral values and performance-based traits, it would also add another dimension focused on intellectual character by cultivating good thinking (Porter, 2015). The aim of the VDC is to train students to become more open to diverse viewpoints and more willing to engage in positive political discourse—both goals are indicative of effective democratic deliberation (Malin, Jahromi-Ballard, Attai, Colby, Damon, 2014). Porter (2015) found that the present research suggests that intellectual humility, in particular, can enhance civic outcomes as well as intellectual ones.

By putting love of learning ahead of looking smart, Porter (2015) posits that students high in intellectual humility might also measure high in intrinsic motivation and achievement goals, and both constructs could have powerful effects on student outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2003; Grant & Dweck, 2003). Furthermore, research shows that performance-oriented students concerned with looking good rather than learning well sometimes withdraw effort in school, whereas students interested in learning persist in challenging situations (Porter, 2015). This might help explain why high school students

high in intellectual humility use effective learning strategies more frequently, self-regulating their metacognition and effort levels (Porter, 2015). An environment rich in intellectual humility may also result in conditions more conducive to effective group work. Baron (2009) found that low quality group work experiences do not produce the same learning gains as high quality ones, and group members learned more the more responsive and respectful of one another they were. Overall, intellectual humility is positively associated with adaptive motivational outcomes, study strategies, and collaboration, suggesting that intellectual humility can help students succeed (Porter, 2015).

### **Political Discourse: A Positive Path Forward Starts Here**

Political polarization is not going away, and to encourage positive discourse in American democracy, certain skills can be taught beginning in high school. First, students must understand that other people matter, and that human values are essentially the same even though people may prioritize them differently. Students must also be aware of their own biases, and use this knowledge to turn weaknesses into strengths. By coming to understand the limitations of their knowledge, students must assume a degree of intellectual humility. Finally, students must be taught to actively seek out otherside arguments. Research suggests that people often fail to evaluate their own and others' knowledge accurately, fairly, and rationally, given their susceptibility to intellectual bias (Porter & Schumann, 2016). But research also suggests that these biases can be overcome through awareness, rational thought, active other-centeredness, a growth mindset, and a psychological disposition of intellectual humility—these are teachable concepts that can be put into practice, and hence they are the goals of the VDC.

**Time to Take Action: Plans to Pilot the VDC**

Persistent problems need to be addressed to ease a deepening social crisis in the United States—problems such as inequality, corruption, isolation, and distrust (Helliwell et al., 2017). Unless American citizens can come together to discuss these issues, things will only continue to worsen. Uncomfortable conversations need to happen for progress to be made, and attention must be paid to a myriad of things that may seem not to matter in a world full of wanting and achieving. Political polarization has all but stymied constructive discourse, and so we look to education for a positive path forward.

The VDC consists of 24 lessons written to meet the stated objectives, and is intended to be easily modified for flexible use in preexisting curriculums. There is a standard pre- and post-assessment (see Appendix A) so that attitudes and behavioral outcomes can be measured. In addition, sample lessons have been attached with core-content evaluations meant to work in concert with the VDC objectives (see Appendix B). The initial pilot of the VDC will take place in the fall trimester of the 2017-18 school year, and it will include about 30 students in a core English class comprised of juniors, seniors, and post-graduate students in an independent college preparatory school located in Pennsylvania. The trimester course will last approximately 11 instructional weeks. After the initial pilot, adjustments will be made to the curriculum as necessary, and decisions will be made regarding teacher training in terms of preparing educators to effectively administer the VDC and encourage positive political discourse in their classrooms. Administration has already given it its approval for the pilot program, and little to no pushback is anticipated because of the stated objectives of the VDC. This is not a curriculum intended to push a certain viewpoint, but to appreciate the diversity of

viewpoints, and no moral or political stances are to be explicitly taught—instead, the focus remains on awareness, intellectual humility, and actively open-minded thinking.

It helps to bear in mind the words of David Foster Wallace (2005), who reminds us that the most obvious and important realities are often the most difficult to see and discuss, how blind certainties equate to mental imprisonment, and how we are naturally, deeply, and literally self-centered. The point of education is to try to get closer to the truth, and the job of teaching is to facilitate that goal by mitigating arrogance and finding ways to encourage critical awareness of others, ourselves, and our certainties. The VDC is not about the capacity to think—it's about empowering students with the freedom to choose what to think about. The grand hope is that it will lead students to realize that other people matter, even when their politics and values differ.

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## APPENDIX A

**VDE Pre-Assessment Survey for Adolescents**

(C. Mehl, 2017—Modified by E.M. Griffin)

To allow us to link your responses now to your responses later, while preserving your anonymity, please make up a 6-digit code. We suggest that you do this by thinking of the phone number you remember best from your childhood – your own or a friend’s. Then take the last 6 digits of it.

**Please write your code here:** \_\_\_\_\_

In each of the three spaces below, please list up to five things that you think are common beliefs held by progressives (Democrats or people on the left), conservatives (Republicans or people on the right), and libertarians. (You can hit the Enter key to get additional lines in each space.)

1. Progressives (people on the left) believe...

2. Conservatives (people on the right) believe...

3. Libertarians believe...

Please choose one of the options below to indicate the extent to which you agree with each statement. [Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree].

4. Progressives (people on the left) are generally good people.
5. Conservatives (people on the right) are generally good people.
6. Libertarians are generally good people.
7. Most conservatives hate the poor.
8. Most progressives hate America.

9. If I found out that a classmate often volunteered to support conservative causes, I would be less interested in being friends with him or her.
10. If I found out that a classmate often volunteered to support progressive causes, I would be less interested in being friends with him or her.

Please choose one of the options below to indicate the extent to which each statement describes you. [Very much like me, Somewhat like me, Neutral, Somewhat unlike me, Not at all like me]

11. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.
12. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments.
13. I believe that there are multiple sides to every question and I try to consider as many as I can.
14. I am open to revising my important beliefs in the face of new information.
15. I am willing to change my position on an important issue in the face of good reasons.
16. I respect others even if I disagree with them in important ways.
17. I am willing to hear others out, even if I disagree with them.
18. I welcome different ways of thinking about important topics.
19. When someone disagrees with ideas that are important to me, it feels as though I'm being attacked.
20. I feel threatened when others disagree with me on topics that are close to my heart.
21. I question my own opinions, positions, and viewpoints because they could be wrong.
22. I recognize the value in opinions that are different from my own.
23. I accept that my beliefs and attitudes may be wrong.
24. I like finding out new information that differs from what I already think is true.
25. My intelligence is something about me that I can't change very much.

People have different views about politics. Please choose one of the options below to indicate the extent to which you agree with each statement. [Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree].

25. I realize that I don't know everything that I need to know about politics.
26. I am open to new information in the area of politics that might change my view.
27. My views about politics today may someday turn out to be wrong.
28. When it comes to my views about politics I may be overlooking evidence.
29. My views about politics may change with additional evidence or information.

How do you describe your gender? \_\_\_Female \_\_\_Male \_\_\_Other \_\_\_Prefer not to say

How do you describe your race/ethnicity?

- African American/Black
- Native American or Alaskan Native
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/Latino
- Middle Eastern/North African
- South Asian
- White
- Multiracial
- Other
- Prefer not to say

What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

When it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as:

- Very Progressive/left
- Progressive/left
- Slightly Progressive/left
- Moderate/Middle-of-the-road
- Slightly Conservative/right
- Conservative/right
- Very Conservative/right
- Libertarian
- Don't know/Not political
- Other
- Prefer not to say

## APPENDIX B

**Teacher Takeaways: A Busy Educator’s Guide to Pedagogical Points of a VDC****Why does our society need a Viewpoint Diversity Curriculum?**

- America needs to focus on rebuilding social capital through promoting cross-partisan understanding (Helliwell et. al, 2017).
- Reason dictates that the obvious place for this kind of work is in our school systems.—A goal of American education has always been to educate children to be moral and respectful citizens (McClellan, 1999), and schools are important determinants of a child’s well-being (Helliwell et al., 2017).

**How can a Viewpoint Diversity Curriculum (VDC) Make a Difference?**

- Teaching viewpoint diversity in secondary schools will create a path for positive political discourse on college campuses and in communities across the country.
- A VDC would have the objectives of:
  - increasing knowledge of the polarized American political spectrum (a prerequisite for understanding viewpoint diversity)
  - cultivating self-awareness and intellectual humility (knowing our strengths and weaknesses, that we don’t know everything, and we might, in fact, be wrong about what we believe)
  - teaching actively open-minded thinking (AOT) skills (actively looking for reasons other people’s views differ from our own).
- Society would benefit from secondary schools adopting a VDC that uses concepts such as moral frameworks and intellectual humility and skills such as AOT as a basis for understanding people with opposing perspectives.
- The goal of this curriculum is not agreement or consensus, but understanding.

**What can schools do?**

- Focus on the positive
- Engage others in a collective purpose
- Foster strong relationships
- Habituate students to see things from different points of view
- Promote awareness & disciplined action—the ultimate character ed
- Encourage self-directed, reasoned understanding

**What do students need?**

- To have a basic understanding of their own strengths and biases
- To develop a sense of intellectual humility
- To learn how to perform well-reasoned thinking

**What can teachers teach?**

- Students must understand that human values are widely shared even though people may prioritize them differently—Moral Foundations Theory can be used.
- Students must also be aware of their own biases, and use this knowledge to turn weaknesses into strengths.
- Basic cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) skills that compliment actively open-minded thinking (AOT)
  - Both CBT and AOT teach to value evidence over emotion, and both require skills to actively seek out and objectively evaluate evidence that contradicts an original hypothesis (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).
- Intellectual humility: It's less important to look smart than it is to be smart. This is a key lesson for teenaged students who need to understand the difference between reputation and character.
- Research suggests that people often fail to evaluate their own and others' knowledge accurately, fairly, and rationally, given their susceptibility to intellectual bias (Porter & Schumann, 2016). But research also suggests that these biases can be overcome through awareness, rational thought, active other-centeredness, a growth mindset, and a psychological disposition of intellectual humility—these are teachable concepts that can be put into practice, and hence they are the goals of the VDC.

**TAKEAWAYS ON TEACHING AWARENESS**

- By emphasizing the fact that everyone has something to contribute, and by helping students capitalize on self-awareness through this self-affirmation, teachers may be able to help reduce defensive responses (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Critcher, Dunning, & Armor, 2010).
- Once this defensive response is neutralized, it's possible that the processing of opposing views may increase (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000).
- This simple shift in focus to what unites us (a shared set of moral values) from what divides us (the way we prioritize those values) represents a strengths-based approach in the spirit of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2005).
- Until we recognize that our view of reality is a construction, not a direct vision of the truth, we run the risk of continuing to think of ourselves, quite mistakenly, as objective individuals in a world full of biased others. This myopic view leads to misunderstanding as it allows people to deceive themselves into thinking that others with whom they disagree are unreasonable (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). For this reason, it would help students to have some basic knowledge about their own cognitive processes and resulting biases.
- Self-awareness is a core psychological process that is necessary for many kinds of goal-directed behavior (Leary & Guadagno, 2011); thus, it is

important that students be made aware of the ways one's emotions can impact thinking, beliefs, and judgments (Samuelson et al., 2015).

- Because people are more likely to support causes that are framed in the context of being value-congruent with their ideology, students may be more open to hearing both sides of an argument from two groups whose moral foundations at least seem familiar to them (Feinberg & Willer, 2015). For this reason, the VDC uses Moral Foundations Theory as a framework (Haidt, 2012).

### **TAKEAWAYS ON TEACHING INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY**

- In order to reach the kind of self-examination needed to foster wisdom, students must be able to check their “bias blind spot” and engage intellectually. Once students are taught that most people tend to overestimate their intellectual strengths and underestimate their weaknesses, they can endeavor to become less afraid to admit or correct mistakes, and more open-minded to listen to all sides of an argument.
- Knowing about cognitive biases makes it more likely that one would become intellectually humble, and as Samuelson et al. point out, the key to mitigating bias may be having what could be called the intellectually humble position of “a common interest in the truth” (2015, p. 29).
- While achievement certainly matters, it seems exceptionally promising that intellectual humility may go beyond performance to foster something more like purpose—students who are intellectually humble have a more durable, adaptive motivation to learn (Dweck, 1999; Porter, 2015).
- This question of what motivates students to achieve is particularly interesting—if schools can foster a true love of learning in students, that is an achievement that extends beyond academic performance. Porter found that both types of motivation – “wanting to learn and wanting to look smarter than others” – boosted students’ grades, but caring mostly about looking smart can sabotage intellectual growth, particularly when students encounter challenging material (2015, p. 67). In this sense, perhaps intellectual humility can be seen as a kind of gracious grit—a pure source of personal perseverance to keep learning for learning’s sake.
- It is important that a VDC includes lessons designed to reduce bias, teach reflective judgment, and promote “other-centered” thinking.
- Several types of “other-centered” thinking are effective techniques for reducing biases:
  - “a search for accuracy (representing reality that is shared by others)
  - a need to be accountable for one’s judgments (to defend one’s thoughts to another)
  - the use of rules of analysis (a process used by many others to arrive at a more consensual judgment)
  - exposure to differing perspectives (seeing things from another’s point of view)” (p. 27; King and Kitchener, 2004)

- Activities to develop reflective judgment should force students to examine their assumptions, analyze evidence from multiple sources and perspectives, and take responsibility for their own conclusions.
- Teachers might also do well to be cognizant of students' capacity for intellectual humility when arranging group work, as research indicates that intellectually humble students may be more willing to collaborate with their peers (Porter, 2015).

### **TAKEAWAYS ON TEACHING ACTIVELY OPEN-MINDED THINKING (AOT)**

- Although thinking dispositions function more like enduring traits, they are also considered teachable skills (Baron, 1993).
- The real danger is not that people are apt to think too little, it is that they are apt to have great confidence in answers that were reached with little thinking (Baron, 2009).
- Studies have found that “asking people to consider the possibility that competing hypotheses are true is sufficient to undo the bias of one-sided thinking” (Samuelson et al., 2015, p. 31).
- Bias must be countered by looking actively for other possibilities and evidence on the other side—this is known as *actively open-minded thinking* (AOT).
- The VDC, in its attempt to help students understand the underpinnings of American democracy, must involve the practice of rational thought and the rejection of blind faith in authority (of self or others).
- Those with growth mindset persevere after failure and learn from mistakes (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Samuelson et al., 2015; Porter & Schumann, 2016). Not only that, but students benefit from growth mindset because it will prepare them for an attitude regarding the tentative nature of knowledge and the need to thoroughly evaluate evidence from as many angles as possible.
- We also may be able to foster intellectual humility by helping people understand that intelligence is not a fixed asset, but something that can be developed throughout life (Porter & Schumann, 2016).
- It is clear that AOT can be taught, and that to some extent, culture and education may do this (Baron, 1993).
- AOT can be successfully taught with explicit encouragement and direction, but not by simply requiring students to think (Baron, 1993).
- Some practices known to foster a growth mindset of intelligence will also foster intellectual humility:
  - direct instruction to teach students that intelligence is malleable (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck 2007)
  - praising students for effort rather than ability (Mueller & Dweck, 1998)
  - having educators who believe and act according to the belief that each student has intellectual potential (Dweck, 2010)



**EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES TO EXPECT FROM USING THE VDC:**

- While the VDC would cover aspects of moral values and performance-based traits, it would also add another dimension focused on intellectual character by cultivating good thinking (Porter, 2015).
- The aim of the VDC is to train students to become more open to diverse viewpoints and more willing to engage in positive political discourse—both goals are indicative of effective democratic deliberation (Malin, Jahromi-Ballard, Attai, Colby, Damon, 2014). Porter (2015) found that intellectual humility, in particular, can enhance civic outcomes as well as intellectual ones.
- By putting love of learning ahead of looking smart, Porter (2015) posits that students high in intellectual humility might also measure high in intrinsic motivation and achievement goals, and both constructs could have powerful effects on student outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2003; Grant & Dweck, 2003).
- Research shows that performance-oriented students concerned with looking good rather than learning well sometimes withdraw effort in school, whereas students interested in learning persist in challenging situations (Porter, 2015). This might help explain why high school students high in intellectual humility use effective learning strategies more frequently, self-regulating their metacognition and effort levels (Porter, 2015).
- An environment rich in intellectual humility may also result in conditions more conducive to effective group work. Baron (2009) found that low quality group work experiences do not produce the same learning gains as high quality ones, and group members learned more the more responsive and respectful of one another they were. Overall, intellectual humility is positively associated with adaptive motivational outcomes, study strategies, and collaboration, suggesting that intellectual humility can help students succeed (Porter, 2015).
- School cultures also matter, and those that value a love of learning over academic performance would also help foster the proper conditions for all the elements of the VDC—awareness, other-centeredness, intellectual humility, and openness conducive to AOT. Furthermore, school faculty can commit to the concept of intellectual humility, modeling it for students. Porter and Schumann (2016) suggests that schools in which faculty and staff readily acknowledge the limitations of their knowledge and their willingness to learn from others may encourage students to do so, as well.

**Case Study: Content Area Lesson Plans for VDC**

Class Title: Style and Structure

Class Description: English 224: Style and Structure

This course, required of all juniors, new seniors, and postgraduates during the fall term, completes the second or basic skills phase of the English curriculum. Through the close analysis of major works of British and American literature, students will refine their critical reading and writing skills, develop a vocabulary of literary terms, and encounter different techniques of literary analysis. All students will have a chance to identify and correct individual writing weaknesses before they enter the elective phase of our English curriculum.

Integrating the Viewpoint Diversity Curriculum:

Style and Structure revolves around two major concepts: Analysis of literature through a variety of lenses (or perspectives), and strengthening of writing skills. These skills can easily be taught in conjunction with the VDC by:

- asking essential questions
- engaging in whole-class debates
- examining multiple perspectives (a.k.a. diverse viewpoints)
- forming personal connections
- collaborating with peers
- constructing thorough arguments

The first week of class will serve to introduce concepts associated with the VDC, while also including a writing assessment that will serve objectives of both the VDC and the English academic content areas. Students will have read one book for summer reading. For this grade level, the choices are as follows:

**Fiction**

1. Emma (Jane Austen)
2. Peace Like a River (Leif Enger)
3. White Teeth (Zadie Smith)
4. Birds of America (Lorrie Moore)

\*Students will be asked to write about how what they read either reaffirmed or changed a belief they have. They will follow guidelines based on NPR's "This I Believe" segment.

**Non-Fiction**

1. A Short History of Everything (Bill Bryson)
2. Guns, Germs, and Steel (Jared Diamond)
3. Behind the Beautiful Forevers (Katherine Boo)

**Poetry/Drama**

1. Sinner's Welcome (Karr)
2. Native Guard (Trethewey)
3. The Heidi Chronicles (Wasserstein)

**Week One—Objectives Overview**

Awareness/Intellectual Humility/Actively Open-Minded Thinking

**Day 1—CLASS INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW**

Duration: (This is a short class on the first day of school—25 minutes)

First order of business: Introductions (Go around the room, introduce with first name, hometown, how many years at Sem, and answer this question: “What’s more important—style or structure?”)

-Brief overview of class—What is Style and Structure?

- Learning about different critical lenses/viewpoints
- Constructing meaning from experience/self-awareness & other-awareness
- Strengthening writing and skills/actively open-minded thinking (AOT)

-Brief overview of policies and procedures:

- Hand out syllabus
- Class expectations and guidelines
- Introduction to class website

Why does this stuff matter? Essential Course Questions:

- How do we see ourselves? How does our sense of self shape our opinions of others? How does it shape our ideas about our democracy and the world at large? How can literature help us to expand our minds and sharpen our senses? How can learning to write more effectively make us better thinkers? How can an appreciation of diverse viewpoints help make us better people?

Wrap Up:

- Being educated means we get to choose how to think.
- First, we have to start with simple awareness:
- Introduce “This is Water,” the truncated version:
- <https://vimeo.com/188418265>

-Homework—Taking the VIA Survey—Write down the top five strengths, considered “signature strengths.” Bring them to class tomorrow WITH the book that was chosen for summer reading.

**Days 2 & 3— Cultivating Awareness—Knowing one’s strengths & weaknesses**

Duration: (1 50-minute class &amp; 1 90-minute class)

First order of business: summer reading books should be on top of desks along with list of signature strengths.

-Taking the pre-survey for the VDC (see Appendix A) (10 minutes)

**Part One—Self-Awareness: Identifying Strengths:**

- Self-Awareness—Identifying strengths—Random pairings.
- 5 Strengths in 5 minutes intervention (10 minutes—See Appendix C)
- Small Group Discussion (If possible, group by Book—Discuss impressions—can you spot your own strengths/values at work in your textual interpretations? (20 minutes)
- Large Group Debriefing—Why is it important to know our strengths? (10 minutes)

-Homework—Brainstorm “This I Believe” Assignment (Due Day 7—See Appendix D)

**Part Two—Self-Awareness: Understanding Bias:**

First order of business: Pair and Share Brainstorming Ideas for “This I Believe” (10 minutes)

Next: When can our beliefs lead us astray? Now that we understand our strengths, it’s time to recognize our biases.

Pre-Teach the following (10 minutes):

Anchoring bias	Relying too much on the first piece of information you learn or hear
Blind-spot bias	Recognizing bias in others, but failing to recognize it in yourself
Confirmation bias	Searching for and trusting only information that confirms your beliefs
Negativity bias	Focusing on negative events at the expense of positive or neutral events
Outcome bias	Judging or evaluating a decision based solely on the outcome

Segue with discussion regarding “fake news.” Get student opinions and feedback. (5 minutes)

Show video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNmwwntMF5A&feature=youtu.be> (5 minutes)

Use modified lesson from The Lowdown (<https://ww2.kqed.org/lowdown/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2017/05/Can-You-Beat-Cognitive-Bias-lesson-plan.pdf>) Step One in overcoming bias? Awareness. Small groups can take a quiz linked above.

Homework: Drafting “This I Believe” essay

**Day 4—Fostering Intellectual Humility—We Might Be Wrong (50-minute class)**

First order of Business: Journaling—“Write about a time you believed you were right, but turned out to be wrong. What happened? Tell the story. Describe the outcome.” (10 minutes)

Large Group Discussion: Who’s willing to share? Are there benefits to being wrong? (5 minutes) Follow-up: Can you look back at your stories and find any of your strengths or biases at work? (5 minutes) Will someone share? (5 minutes)

Let’s watch a video about the value of being wrong, which is something we don’t talk about enough in school:

[https://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn\\_schulz\\_on\\_being\\_wrong?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn_schulz_on_being_wrong?language=en)

**Kathryn Schultz—On being wrong (17:51)**

Most of us will do anything to avoid being wrong. But what if we're wrong about that? "Wrongologist" Kathryn Schulz makes a compelling case for not just admitting but embracing our fallibility.

Wrap Up: Thoughts on the video?

Homework: Finish Final Draft of “This I Believe,” Write a one-typed page response to this question: “One thing I learned from being wrong...”

**Day 5—Fostering Intellectual Humility—Growth Mindset (50-minute class)**

First Order of Business: Feedback on the assignment from the previous class. What kinds of things have you learned from being wrong? (10 minutes)

Segue: If we can learn so much from being wrong, why are we so afraid of it? Open discussion—write ideas from students on the white board.

Watch the following video:

Understanding “Not Yet”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y19TVbAa15s&feature=youtu.be>

**Carol Dweck—The Power of Believing That You Can Improve (10:25)**

Dweck’s 10-minute TED talk is an excellent entry point to the subject. She walks you through “the power of yet”—and its polar opposite, “the tyranny of now”—to show how we can influence our own brain’s capacity for learning.

Homework: Proofread Final Draft of “This I Believe”—Consult rubric to see if you’ve covered all your bases!

**Day 6—Introducing Actively Open-Minded Thinking (50-minute class)**

First Order of Business: Thoughts on yesterday? Can we change our brains? Why should we want to?

First, a short video to answer question #1: Neuroplasticity

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELpfYCZa87g>

Post-video talk: What are the implications of this video? What does it mean?

Let's talk about some specific scenarios where you're likely to make quick judgments about right and wrong. Break class into small groups of 3 or 4 students.

Use Haidt's moral dilemmas—which can be found at the link below, but are also pasted:

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn21548-dog-dinners-and-other-moral-dilemmas/>

Present scenarios one at a time, and each student should jot down initial reactions. Then each group must justify those reactions.

Scenario #1: A family's dog is killed by a car in front of their house. They have heard that heard that dog meat is delicious, so they cook it and eat it for dinner. Is this wrong? Why?

Scenario #2: Julie and Mark are a brother and sister who, one night on a vacation together, decide to make love. Julie is already taking birth-control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. Was it wrong for them to have sex?

Scenario #3: I have some fresh orange juice, into which I have dipped a sterilized cockroach. The roach was bought from a lab supply company, raised in a clean environment. It has been stored in alcohol, but just to be certain, I sterilized it again in an autoclave, which heats everything so much that no germs can survive. Would you drink the juice?

What strengths or biases can you see in your justifications?

Homework: Take the scenario you feel most strongly about—the one for which you feel your reaction and reasoning is most right or most justified. For homework, phrase your argument for what you think you're right about as a question, and follow these steps:

1. Explain your question and why it is important.
2. Present the most obvious answer or answers.
3. Consider less obvious alternatives, or objections to the obvious answers.
4. Rebut the criticisms, or explain how the original answers can be modified to deal with them.

## APPENDIX C

### **Strength Intervention:**

Niemiec proposed a 5-strengths in 5-minutes exercise that he used with our MAPP class, and followed it up by applying his aware, explore, apply intervention (2009). Students should gain awareness of their strengths by reviewing their survey results. With a partner, they take one minute to talk about each of their top five strengths. They must spend one full minute on each one, reflecting on where and how they play (and played) a role in their lives.

### **Character Strengths: What are they, and why do they matter?**

There are 24 universally-valued character strengths, and the VIA Inventory of Strengths is a well-validated instrument that helps measure them in individuals; the VIA Classification is a widely used framework for helping individuals discover, explore, and use those qualities that are strongest in them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA Inventory of Strengths is a measurement tool that is free and online at [www.viasurvey.org](http://www.viasurvey.org). It has good reliability and validity, as it has been widely used by researchers publishing in peer-reviewed scientific journals their studies of the correlates and outcomes of various character strengths (Niemiec, 2013). There are many correlations between character strengths and desirable outcomes, such as life satisfaction. More and more applications are being developed to practice character strengths. Signature strengths are character strengths that are displayed the majority of time in relevant settings, readily named and owned by the individual, and are easily recognized by others as characteristic of the individual (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Knowing one's strengths and building on them enables an approach to build resiliency in adversity.

### **Cultivating Strengths of our Students and our Schools**

One of the most important and interesting areas for applying the research on character strengths is for use with children, adolescents, teachers, and school systems. The VIA Youth Survey is a well-validated and widely used tool for the assessment of character strengths in children/adolescents between the ages of 10 and 17 (Park & Peterson, 2006). Research tells us that, among youth, the character strengths most related to life satisfaction are love, gratitude, hope, and zest. We also know that young children between the ages of three to nine whose parents describe them as happy are also noted to show love, hope, and zest (Park & Peterson, 2009). As children grow into young adults, however, the character-strength predictors of satisfaction appear to change along with the demands of life. For instance, one study finds that character strength predictors of satisfaction in college were hope, social intelligence, self-regulation, and fairness (Lounsbury et al., 2009). We have to consider the implications of these changing needs and how we can best create an environment that fosters hope for all, above all.

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## APPENDIX D

## “This I Believe” Assignment

Students will be asked to write a personal essay entitled “This I Believe,” and the topic should be related to their summer reading somehow. They need not address the connection in the writing itself—that will come later when they are asked to present their writing and make the connection between what they’ve read over the summer and what they believe personally.

Here is a short history on “This I Believe” from NPR:

(<http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/about.html>)

*“This I Believe* is based on a 1950s radio program of the same name, hosted by acclaimed journalist Edward R. Murrow. In creating *This I Believe*, Murrow said the program sought “to point to the common meeting grounds of beliefs, which is the essence of brotherhood and the floor of our civilization.”

In spite of the fear of atomic warfare, increasing consumerism and loss of spiritual values, the essayists on Murrow's series expressed tremendous hope. “We hear a country moving toward more equality among the races and between genders,” says Gediman.

“We hear parents writing essays that are letters to their newborn children expressing the hopes and dreams they have for them. And we hear the stories of faith that guide people in their daily experiences.”

Each day, millions of Americans gathered by their radios to hear compelling essays from the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt, Jackie Robinson, Helen Keller and Harry Truman as well as corporate leaders, cab drivers, scientists and secretaries -- anyone able to distill into a few minutes the guiding principles by which they lived. Their words brought comfort and inspiration to a country worried about the Cold War, McCarthyism and racial division.

“As in the 1950s, this is a time when belief is dividing the nation and the world,” says Allison about life today. “We are not listening well, not understanding each other -- we are simply disagreeing, or worse. Working in broadcast communication, there's a responsibility to change that, to cross borders, to encourage some empathy. That possibility is what inspires me about this series.”

In reviving *This I Believe*, Allison and Gediman say their goal is not to persuade Americans to agree on the same beliefs. Rather, they hope to encourage people to begin the much more difficult task of developing respect for beliefs different from their own.”

### **This I Believe Essay Writing Suggestions**

**Tell a story about you:** Be specific. Take your belief out of the ether and ground it in the events that have shaped your core values. Consider moments when belief was formed or tested or changed. Think of your own experience, work, and family, and tell of the things you know that no one else does. Your story need not be heart-warming or gut-wrenching—it can even be funny—but it should be *real*. Make sure your story ties to the essence of your daily life philosophy and the shaping of your beliefs.

**Be brief:** Your statement should be between 500 and 600 words. That's about three minutes when read aloud at your natural pace.

**Name your belief:** If you can't name it in a sentence or two, your essay might not be about belief. Also, rather than writing a list, consider focusing on one core belief.

**Be positive:** Write about what you do believe, not what you don't believe. Avoid statements of religious dogma, preaching, or editorializing.

**Be personal:** Make your essay about you; speak in the first person. Avoid speaking in the editorial "we." Tell a story from your own life; this is not an opinion piece about social ideals. Write in words and phrases that are comfortable for you to speak. We recommend you read your essay aloud to yourself several times, and each time edit it and simplify it until you find the words, tone, and story that truly echo your belief and the way you speak.

**“This I Believe” Personal Essay Rubric**

A=Essays earning this grade will *clearly and cleverly* relate a statement of personal philosophy or belief *in a way that communicates the significance*. The essay is well-developed (500 to 600 words), detailed and *authentic*. Any specific actions, movements, gestures, thoughts, and feelings are described in a way that paints a visual picture of the story, in a clear first person voice. Strategies for adding detail, action, and imagery, or other types of relevant support, are appropriately and widely employed. The essay is paced well, meaning that it moves smoothly from point to point, not lingering too long on minor details or giving little attention to seemingly important details. The story provides a profound moral, lesson, or understanding. These papers are well written with *virtually no errors* in grammar, spelling, or punctuation. The essay is fully prepared for submission to NPR, including all formatting and proper title.

B= Essays earning this grade will *clearly* relate a statement of personal philosophy or belief. The essay is somewhat brief, but is detailed and *authentic*. Any specific actions, movements, gestures, thoughts, and feelings are described in a way that paints a visual picture of the story, in a clear first person voice. Strategies for adding detail, action, and imagery, or other types of relevant support, are appropriately and widely employed. The essay is paced fairly well, moving from point to point. The story provides a shift in perspective; what was believed or thought in the beginning changes at the end, and this change conveys a moral, lesson, or understanding. These papers are well written with very few errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation (standard language conventions). The essay is mostly prepared for submission to NPR.

C= The essay may or may not fully meet word requirements, but still has some details, some imagery and feelings, although more would better give the reader an idea of the point being made. The story may seem lop-sided in places, with points where too much or too little detail is given. The story provides a lesson of some sort, but it may not be insightful, interesting, or relevant. These papers may have minor errors in grammar, spelling, etc. The essay is not ready for submission to NPR.

D= Essays earning this grade will relate a statement of personal philosophy or belief in a very general way. The essay may or may not meet word requirements and may lack sufficient details. The story is lop-sided in places, with points where too much or too little detail is given. The story provides a shift in perspective, but that shift is not interesting or clearly explained. These papers may have several errors in standard language conventions. The essay is not prepared for submission to NPR.

F= Essays earning this grade do not meet minimum requirements.