“Social Workers Can’t Be Republicans”: Engaging Conservative Students in the Classroom

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“Social Workers Can’t Be Republicans”: Engaging Conservative Students in the Classroom

Justin E. Lerner

ABSTRACT
Over the past 50 years, the United States has experienced the disappearance of moderate politics replaced by a more divisive political ideology. As the country has become more polarized, universities, schools of social work, and professors have increasingly leaned left. In this era of extreme political polarization, social work educators have a responsibility to create a classroom environment in which conservative students can enhance the diversity of thought in schools of social work so that all students can be more skillful social workers while helping these students understand social work values derived from the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics. Using Johari’s window as a theoretical framework, recommendations are provided on how to productively engage conservative students.

Social work educators have always had the challenging task of interacting with students from all political ideologies. Students across the political spectrum need to feel welcome and included in the social work classroom while also understanding the profession’s core values. As the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2017) Code of Ethics advocates a strong stance on social justice principles that focus on eradicating poverty, unemployment, oppression, and discrimination while promoting equality of opportunity along with cultural and ethnic diversity, these tasks may not always be easy. Social work educators need to strive toward a goal of creating a classroom climate in which dialogue that can feel challenging is embraced, conservative opinions of students are understood, a balance of multiple viewpoints is presented, and all points of view are valid but not necessarily considered equal in light of the NASW Code of Ethics.

The 2016 election cycle along with the election of a Republican president, House of Representatives, and Senate elevated the current conservative U.S. political climate to the center stage of social work classrooms in much the same way the 1980 conservative revolution drew attention to national politics (Stewart, 1981). Social work educators often must engage with and lead these challenging discussions in the classroom as a mandate from the field’s professional ethics (Miller, Donner, & Fraser, 2004). Now more than ever, universities need to prepare social work educators with the skills, resources, and knowledge to facilitate these important conversations.

Claims of a “liberal bias” in U.S. higher education are commonly made in the academy (Zipp & Fenwick, 2006, p. 305). Although this “lean left” (Green, 2016, para. 3) has existed for decades, a sharp rise in an ideological imbalance became more pronounced in the mid-1990s and has continued through the current era as the Greatest Generation was retiring and the end of the Boomer generation was entering the academy (Abrams, 2016). This shift to the left has resulted in registered Democratic social scientist professors outnumbering registered Republican social scientist professors by a ratio of 11.5 to 1 (Langbert, Quain, & Klein, 2016). These polarizing trends were mirrored in the larger society during the same time period, especially in Congress (addressed later). Although this ratio does not specifically include social work professors, social work is closely aligned with many social sciences and therefore would likely reveal similar voter registration profiles among social work professors.

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Not surprisingly, however, the field of social work attracts a diverse cross-section of students representing all types of identities, including politically conservative students (Fram & Miller-Cribbs, 2008). Although these students do not necessarily hold prejudiced or biased beliefs, their conservative values commonly become conflated with bias and bigotry. Social work educators must learn how to help debunk this misconception in order to have authentic conversations in the classroom in which all students learn how to listen and to have healthy dialogue with one another. However, it is critical for these conversations to occur within a framework of social work values based on the NASW (2017) Code of Ethics. Social work educators are responsible for teaching students how to respect every opinion yet challenge views that may counter the Code of Ethics or are actually biased but may be masked as simply a conservative belief. For example, a conservative student may personally believe that gay marriage is morally wrong based on their religious doctrine. This opinion is not equivalent to the student believing that gay people should not be allowed to legally marry. Social work professors need to help students clarify and understand these types of nuances without conflating them. If the student was actually attempting to express the latter belief, then the social work educator would need to help the student understand that this opinion is prejudiced and counters the value of social justice in the NASW Code of Ethics.

**Changing political landscape in the United States**

Over the past century, politics in the United States have grown increasingly bitter and divided. Moderate politicians have difficulty surviving in this type of partisan environment commonly attributed to congressional redistricting and retirements of moderate lawmakers who do not want to be involved in deeply partisan reelection campaigns (Poole, 2008). For the 2010 U.S. Census, Republicans redistricted precinct boundaries in traditional battleground states including Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin, leading to substantial advantages in these states’ U.S. or state legislative races (Lieb, 2017). In 2012 several moderate members of the U.S. Senate, including Maine Republican Senator Olympia Snowe, Nebraska Democratic Senator Ben Nelson, and North Dakota Democratic Senator Kent Conrad, decided to retire rather than face reelection (Steinhauer, 2012). Moderates are becoming an endangered species in Congress, yet they are critical for solving problems and building consensus.

In 1970 the Democratic and Republican parties showed significant convergence among their political ideologies. Almost 10 years later, that diversity in thought nearly vanished. In the 110th House and Senate (2007–08), 93% of roll call votes were along party lines. The Republican Party, however, has moved to the right as more conservative congressional members replace moderate Republicans outside southern states. The Democratic Party has also mirrored this trend with conservatives displacing moderate and conservative Democrats in the South (Poole, 2008). In 2012 Congress was more politically and ideologically divided since any time in the past century (Poole, 2008; Steinhauer, 2012). In 2014, 90% of Republican House members were not considered politically moderate, whereas 90% of Democratic House members were considered politically moderate. Even though Democrats and Republicans have been shifting from the center, especially since 1975, Republicans have been moving at a much faster rate (Ingraham, 2015).

When examining voting patterns in the United States, the Pew Research Center (2014) found that the proportion of Democratic voters in the United States who consistently harbor liberal positions increased more than fourfold from 5% in 1994 to 13% in 2004 to 23% in 2014, whereas the proportion of Republican voters who consistently embrace conservative positions increased from 6% in 1994 to 20% in 2004. Ten years ago 88% of Republican voters were more conservative than the median Democratic voter while 84% of Democratic voters were more liberal than the median Republican voter. The Pew Research Center also found that in 2014, 99% of Republican voters were more conservative than the median Democratic voter, and 98% of Democrats were more liberal than the median Republican voter.
As Congress and the country have become more polarized over the past century, the U.S. Supreme Court has followed suit. From the Richard Nixon era (1969) to the Bill Clinton era (2000), most confirmed Supreme Court justices were approved almost unanimously with the exceptions of Clarence Thomas, (who was seen as a controversial nominee because of sexual harassment allegations against him), and William Rehnquist (who had a contentious confirmation). These 10 justices were confirmed almost unanimously during the Nixon through Clinton era. Ronald Reagan’s failed nomination of controversial nominee Robert Bork in 1987 (58–42 against confirmation), however, is another example of an exception that paved the way for the current ideological litmus tests that U.S. Supreme Court judicial nominations must endure (Cohen, 2012). Continuing through the George W. Bush era and moving into the current Donald Trump era, Supreme Court nominations appear to be drifting away from a trend of unanimous confirmation. The six confirmations since 2005 have been deeply partisan. See Table 1 for a list of justices and their U.S. Senate confirmation votes between 1969 and 2018 (U.S. Senate, n.d.).

The confirmation of Justice Gorsuch reinforces the high level of partisanship that exists today. Barack Obama originally attempted to appoint a nonpartisan judge, Merrick Garland, who likely would have had support from Democrats and Republicans based on his politically moderate judicial record. The Senate Judiciary Committee, however, refused to schedule a hearing for Garland while Obama was president. This specific incident along with the divided Supreme Court confirmations since 2005 mirror Congress’s shift away from consensus building and compromise to an era of ideologue politics.

### True or false?

**Fake news**

In this highly politicized environment, uncovering truth has become an unfortunate by-product of a resurgence of misinformation and fake news. In the online world, fabricated news is circulated with the intent of generating money from “clicks and views” (Cooke, 2017, p. 211). This information often goes viral without being evaluated for accuracy. Even when this information becomes disproved, the damage usually has already been done, and the evidence remains digitally archived in perpetuity (Cooke, 2017). The case of Dimitri, a Macedonian 18-year-old, provides a quintessential example of how fake news generates confusion and profit. During the 2016 U.S. presidential election

### Table 1. Senate Supreme Court justice confirmation votes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Nominee</th>
<th>President</th>
<th>Vote</th>
<th>Confirmation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Warren Berger</td>
<td>Richard Nixon</td>
<td>74–3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Harry Blackmun</td>
<td>Richard Nixon</td>
<td>94–0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Lewis Powell</td>
<td>Richard Nixon</td>
<td>89–1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>John Paul Stevens</td>
<td>Gerald Ford</td>
<td>98–0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Sandra Day O’Connor</td>
<td>Ronald Reagan</td>
<td>99–0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>William Rehnquist</td>
<td>Ronald Reagan</td>
<td>65–33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Antonin Scalia</td>
<td>Ronald Reagan</td>
<td>98–0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Anthony Kennedy</td>
<td>Ronald Reagan</td>
<td>97–0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>David Souter</td>
<td>George H. W. Bush</td>
<td>90–9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Ruth Bader Ginsburg</td>
<td>Bill Clinton</td>
<td>96–3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Stephen Breyer</td>
<td>Bill Clinton</td>
<td>87–9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>John Roberts</td>
<td>George W. Bush</td>
<td>78–22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Samuel Alito</td>
<td>George W. Bush</td>
<td>58–42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Sonia Sotomayor</td>
<td>Barack Obama</td>
<td>68–31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Elena Kagan</td>
<td>Barack Obama</td>
<td>63–37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Neil Gorsuch</td>
<td>Donald Trump</td>
<td>54–45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Brett Kavanaugh</td>
<td>Donald Trump</td>
<td>50–48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. Note. From U.S. Senate (n.d.).
cycle, Dimitri was one of several teens in the town of Veles in Macedonia who provided fake news for millions of people on social media. The fabricated articles earned him more than $60,000 in 6 months from advertisers that gave him a penny each time someone clicked on the link to an article in a town where the average annual income is $4,800. Most of his money came from supporters of Trump. The most sensationalist headlines included “JUST IN: Obama Illegally Transferred DOJ Money to Clinton Campaign” and “BREAKING: Obama Confirms Refusal to Leave White House, He Will Stay in Power” (Smith & Banic, 2016, para. 12).

Even though the previous example provides a serious illustration of how fake news influenced the U.S. election in 2016, this type of manipulation has important historical roots. Historians since the 12th century have documented fake news stories of Jews murdering children, draining their blood, and drinking it to celebrate Passover as the foundation of anti-Semitism. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 is another example of fake news in which the Church and other European authorities said the natural disaster was punishment for sinners. In the 1800s fake news reports of slave uprisings and criminal activity led to violence against African Americans (Soll, 2016).

**Spin**

In addition to fake news, spin is another commonly used tactic that often promotes misinformation. According to Jackson and Jamieson (2007), spin “paints a false picture of reality by bending facts, mischaracterizing the words of others, ignoring or denying crucial evidence, or just ‘spinning a yarn,’ by making things up” (p. vii). Spin can also be considered counterknowledge, a term originally coined by British journalist Damien Thompson meaning knowledge packaged as fact that critical masses of people begin to believe to be true. This type of knowledge can prevail because it appears somewhat plausible, and people provide it with the social currency necessary for it to survive (Levitin, 2016).

President Trump’s continued concern with voter fraud is an excellent example of spin. He lost the popular vote by more than 3 million to Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, yet he won the Electoral College. He has claimed time and again that his popular vote loss is because of 3 million undocumented immigrants who voted illegally (House & Dennis, 2017). To validate his claim, Trump used his executive powers to create the Presidential Advisory Committee on Election Integrity in May 2017 to investigate voter fraud. Several states have refused to comply with the committee’s request for voter information. Trump has used this refusal to create a sense that voter fraud may actually exist (Schallhorn, 2017). Although no documented evidence exists to substantiate this claim, Trump has been successful in spinning his popular vote loss into a legitimate effort to investigate the issue. However, Trump terminated the committee in January 2018 (Stewart, 2018). It is also important to note that spin is different from fake news because it takes actual facts (e.g., Trump losing the popular vote) and distorts them into something untrue (e.g., Trump lost the popular vote because of voter fraud). Fake news is the creation of information that has no factual basis.

Spin, like fake news, also did not arise with the current administration. At the beginning of the 20th century, Teddy Roosevelt used the emerging power of newspapers to invite reporters to engage in discussions on politics, policy, and current events, providing his own spin on these topics. This practice of inviting reporters over and spinning stories continued into later administrations and produced the modern-day press conference (Wasserman, 2016). This term spin began to gain traction as an actual phrase in politics beginning around the late 1970s when winning the presidency was viewed as an achievement with the help of spin doctors (Andrews, 2006).

**Alternative facts**

Even though spin has existed in politics throughout time, it has always been based on actual facts being distorted. Since the 2016 presidential cycle, however, spin has commonly become replaced with “alternative facts” (Bradner, 2017, para. 3). Kellyanne Conway, Trump’s senior adviser, coined
this term in 2017 on NBC’s *Meet the Press* with host Chuck Todd when asked why former Press Secretary Sean Spicer had claimed that Trump’s inauguration crowd was the largest in history. Conway claimed “You’re saying it’s a falsehood. And they’re giving—Sean Spicer, our press secretary—gave alternative facts.” Todd responded, “Alternative facts aren’t facts, they are falsehoods” (Bradner, 2017, para. 3). Aerial news footage along with an analysis by Manchester Metropolitan University Professor Keith Still revealed that the size of Trump’s inauguration crowd in 2017 was actually about one third the size of Obama’s 2009 inauguration (Wallace, Yourish, & Griggs, 2017).

Another example of Trump’s alternative facts is his wiretapping claims. Trump falsely claimed through several tweets in March 2017 that Obama had wiretapped Trump Tower during the 2016 presidential election cycle. No evidence could back up his claim, and Obama’s spokesman and former U.S. intelligence Chief James Clapper refuted that any wiretap had ever been ordered. Former FBI Director James Comey also corroborated Clapper’s claims stating that the FBI had found no evidence of any wiretapping (“Trump Wiretapping Claim,” 2017). Trump’s insistence on creating these alternative facts has contributed to a postfactual society in which verifying truth becomes an extremely complicated task. George Orwell’s (1949) novel *1984* can be viewed as providing a foundation for the origin of alternative facts in which the totalitarian state limited freedom of thought by creating a language called Newspeak that would reduce the English language to simple concepts and remove words with negative meanings. For example, “bad” becomes “ungood” (Wedge, 2017, para. 6). The administration’s use of the term alternative facts follows this pattern because it loses its negative connotation of “falsehoods” and for some people, becomes actual facts (Wedge, 2017, para. 7). The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s mantra that “Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but they are not entitled to their own facts” is even more timely in social work classrooms today in the face of fake news, spin, and alternative facts (as cited in Abrams, 2016, para. 13).

**Professors’ political ideology**

In an era of fake news and alternative facts, professors become critical in helping students understand how to find reputable sources and decode bias in these mediums. Professors, however, may have difficulty with this task as a trend continues to show a sharp political move left while the U.S. becomes more partisanly divided. Twenty-five years of data from the Higher Education Research Institute has consistently shown the unevenness of political ideology among university professors (Sweeney, 2017). In 1989 the ratio of liberal to conservative professors throughout the northeastern United States was 5 to 1. Nearly 25 years later, this statistic has grown to 28 to 1. Other regions of the country today include a ratio of 3 to 1 in the South and Great Plains as well as a ratio of 6 to 1 on the West Coast (Sweeney, 2017). These ratios are a product of Sarah Lawrence Professor Samuel Abrams using 25 years of data from the Higher Education Research Institute while controlling for all types of variables, such as tenured versus untenured professors, age, income, type of college, selectivity of the college, and department of the professor (Sweeney, 2017; Abrams, 2016). All across the country conservative professors have become a rare commodity with geography being the strongest predictor of how unevenly distributed these professors are (Sweeney, 2017). No data are available indicating that conservative professors outnumber liberal professors anywhere in the country.

Furthermore, professors’ monolithic political ideologies can also be subject to the prejudice gap (Chambers, Schlenker, & Collisson, 2013), which is the idea that conservatives are innately slanted toward intolerance, and liberals are more tolerant toward outsider groups (Farwell & Weiner, 2000). This prejudice gap has been challenged by the ideological-conflict hypothesis suggesting that conservatives and liberals are similarly intolerant against political groups that possess values and beliefs that are inconsistent with their own. For example, pro-life conservatives may flippantly and inaccurately conclude that all pro-choice liberals want to “kill babies” when the issue of abortion is much more nuanced and complex than simply reducing it to a sound bite. Liberals may similarly...
create the same intolerance by deciding that all conservatives who are in favor of limited government and social programs don’t care about poor people and want them “to die.” When liberals or conservatives form opinions about political groups, they create these ideas in a manner that will confirm what they already believe about the group (e.g., liberals want “to kill babies,” and conservatives want “poor people to die”) to validate their own ideological beliefs. This phenomenon is known as motivated information processing. In addition to using it as a strategy to maintain one’s worldview, conservatives and liberals will exhibit intolerance toward groups that possess values different from their own, for example, liberals who support gun control and conservatives who support gun rights (Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2013). The ideological conflict hypothesis along with a lack of political diversity can lead to climates in schools of social work that isolate and silo conservative students.

**Social work schools’ political climate**

The NASW (2017) *Code of Ethics* emphasizes social and political action that advocates for changes in policy and legislation to improve basic human needs and social justice. These values often align with a left-leaning political ideology and tend to attract more socially, politically, and economically liberal students and faculty. Nothing is fundamentally problematic in appealing to a certain demographic of people for a profession. The problem arises, however, when conservative-leaning students and faculty feel discouraged to join the social work profession or are encouraged to leave the profession because of their political beliefs. If these political beliefs are diametrically opposed to the NASW (2017) *Code of Ethics*, then leaving the profession may be in their best interest as well as beneficial for their future students and clients. If, however, their political opinions can be reconciled with the *Code of Ethics*, then these students and faculty will be an asset to other more left-leaning social workers who may not possess an understanding of how to work with a client with more conservative viewpoints.

Because the clientele that social workers serve represent all types of political orientations and values, a heterodoxy of social workers is necessary to best serve the field’s diverse array of clients. Politics inevitably may arise during casework, therapy sessions, or staff meetings. These conversations need to be handled thoughtfully and productively. The more viewpoints people are exposed to often translates to a better understanding of each other in the workforce and to learning how to work in a diverse team (Sweeney, 2017). When social workers of all political orientations learn to work with other colleagues and clients who have different political opinions, they can strengthen their communication and dialogue skills. The opportunity to practice these challenging conversations will essentially help build the muscle for more difficult dialogues in the future, which is a critical skill for all social workers to obtain.

**Cultural humility and politics**

Recognizing that most universities do have a tendency to “lean left” (Green, 2016, para. 3), social work educators have a responsibility to help create classrooms in which a free flow of ideas around political ideology and politics can thrive. Because 60% of university professors in the United States identify as “liberal” or “far-left,” (Ingraham, 2016, para. 1), these conversations can be difficult to navigate. Using cultural humility in understanding political ideology is a critical tool for creating dialogue in the classroom and requires professors and students to participate in a process of self-awareness, commit to learning, and recognize power relations. Cultural humility emphasizes an ongoing self-reflection focused on self-appraisal along with a dedication to always learn more. These principles help create flexibility and humility, which allow people to relieve themselves of stereotyping that can often create a false sense of security. This flexibility and humility can also empower people to admit when they do not know something and can allow them to search for the resources and information that will provide them with the knowledge they are seeking (Tervalon & Murray-
By using tools for developing dialogues in the classroom on political ideology based in cultural humility principles, social work educators can avoid creating barriers between faculty and students by engaging in self-reflection, giving up the role of expert, and being open to learning about everyone’s unique perspective of experiencing the world.

### Johari window model

The Johari window is a theoretical model developed by Ingham and Luft to examine awareness about human behavior and human relations (Luft & Ingham, 1955). The window model consists of four quadrants (window panes) illustrating four types of behaviors, which include behaviors known to the self, behaviors not known to the self, behaviors known to others, and behaviors not known to others (see Table 2). Quadrant 1 is known as areas of free activity, that is, behaviors that are known to the self and others. Quadrant 2 is called opaque areas (originally labeled blind area but renamed to avoid ableist language), meaning areas others can see that people cannot see in themselves. Quadrant 3 is the avoided or hidden area, indicating knowledge people have about themselves but do not reveal to others. Quadrant 4 is the area of unknown activity, or behaviors people do not know about themselves and others do not know about either. Some of the behaviors, however, eventually become known and help people realize these behaviors were negatively affecting human relationships (Luft & Ingham, 1961).

Applying the Johari window to the social work classroom can be instrumental in helping social work educators interact effectively with conservative students. The goal is to increase Quadrant 1, the area of free activity in which the professor and students feel comfortable sharing information about their political views. When Quadrant 1 increases, the avoided or hidden area, Quadrant 2, often decreases (Luft & Ingham, 1961). Students begin to understand their common humanity with each other and the professor through relationship building, thus increasing their sense of camaraderie. Even though political views may differ, the sense of decreasing a hidden area can create more genuine, authentic dialogue. Conservative students commonly will stay in Quadrant 3 if they do not feel the classroom is a space where they can share their dissenting opinions and viewpoints. When mutual trust expands, however, these students will feel less of a need to hide in Quadrant 3 (Luft & Ingham, 1961). Recommendations to decrease Quadrant 3 and increase Quadrant 1 are provided later.

Although the goal for social work educators is to increase Quadrant 1 in their classrooms, they can often become trapped in Quadrants 2 and 3. They must develop strategies to increase their awareness of when they may be operating within these quadrants. For example, professors teaching policy courses may unintentionally only assign articles and media that have a left-leaning political slant. They may be unaware they are not providing a balanced viewpoint on policy and political issues, yet the students may begin to recognize this pattern. Understanding balance is important for social workers to know how to interact with other staff and clients in the workforce who may think very differently from them.

This unbalanced scenario would operate in Quadrant 2 because the lack of balance is not known to the professors, yet the students are aware of the unbalanced information being provided. Because

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quadrant</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quadrant 1</td>
<td>Areas of free activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quadrant 2</td>
<td>Opaque areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quadrant 3</td>
<td>Avoided or hidden areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quadrant 4</td>
<td>Area of unknown activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

other students may notice, they might bring to the professors’ attention how class material is not providing multiple viewpoints. In these same courses, professors could be unaware that they are ignoring conservative students’ opinions in classes by not calling on them or by discrediting their opinions when they speak. Other students in the class, especially if they are more liberal, will likely not even notice what is happening. This pattern would be in Quadrant 4 as neither the students nor instructors are aware of this situation. Eventually, however, students and professors may notice that conservative opinions are being ignored and may begin to address the issue, thus moving away from Quadrant 4 and into Quadrant 1.

**Recommendations for engaging with conservative students**

The following recommendations provide some strategies for engaging with conservative students in the classroom. They are intended to minimize fake news and alternative facts so that students from all political affiliations can learn from each other. The goal of these tactics is to also help decrease Quadrants 2, 3, and 4 and increase Quadrant 1 so that conservative students can fully participate in social work classrooms.

**Use classroom materials from sources with differing viewpoints**

One of the most important elements for engaging conservative students is to examine media that provide differing viewpoints and are also trusted by people who are on opposite ideological sides of the political spectrum. In a Pew Research Center poll of 3,000 randomly selected people in the United States to uncover the most trustworthy news sources, the *Economist*, the BBC, and the *Wall Street Journal* tended to be the most trusted sources of news among people across the ideological spectrum (Engel, 2017). By using these types of sources in the classroom, conservative students will be more likely to feel as though their viewpoint matters. Even though an individual’s viewpoint may need to be challenged if it does not align with the values of the NASW (2017) *Code of Ethics*, conservative students do need to feel they have a space to discuss their opinions because they are part of a social work classroom and program. It is also imperative to include more left-leaning and right-leaning sources so students can examine the same stories from differing ideological spectrums and understand how spin works.

Sources that encompass an intellectual and critical analysis from a more conservative viewpoint include the *Fiscal Times* and the *Hill*; more liberal-leaning media encompassing this critical analysis include the *Atlantic* and the *Guardian* (Langolis, 2016). More popular but opinion- or pundit-based sources include Fox News on the right and MSNBC on the left. The fringes of media sources include Blaze, Breitbart, and the Drudge Report on the right and the *New Yorker*, Slate, and *Huffington Post* on the left (Engel, 2017; Langolis, 2016). When professors provide a plethora of sources on an ideological spectrum, they are guiding the class from unintentionally only consuming news that aligns with the professor’s political ideology (Quadrant 4) to reading news that encompasses all aspects of the political spectrum (Quadrant 1).

**Consider the source**

If a student believes something is true, ask them to provide evidence using critical thinking and analysis skills. In an age of ubiquitous and accessible information, teaching critical thinking specifically focused on uncovering reliable sources becomes vital. Snopes and Politifact are trustworthy websites that can verify the validity of myths and misinformation that often plague the Internet. In addition to these sites, the instructor can teach students to examine the recency of information on websites, examine the URL, avoid using sources that use dogmatic language, and understand the reputation of a website (Cooke, 2017). Students can also check if the website has a copyright (signaling that it has been submitted for ownership) as well as understand the
author’s expertise on the subject; for example, a university professor will often have greater knowledge in a subject area of expertise than someone who sees it as a hobby (Bedley, 2017). These strategies will help teach students how to triangulate information, which will enhance their critical information literacy and their digital literacy. Critical information literacy is the process of learning how to find information that is relevant and has the potential of being useful over a long period of time, and digital literacy is the skill of deciphering the validity of online content (Cooke, 2017). When students increase their critical information literacy as well as digital literacy, they can learn how to consume news with a critical eye that they were not previously aware they lacked (Quadrant 2) and can bring this awareness into the classroom to create a richer and more informed dialogue (Quadrant 1).

**Underscore the importance of differing political ideologies during social work orientations**

Orientations to social work schools are often a time when the values of social justice, diversity, and inclusion are reinforced through activities providing students with the opportunities to explore their own social identities and learn about the identities of their fellow classmates. Although political affiliation may be briefly mentioned as a social identity, it often receives very little attention. During orientations, schools of social work staff can spend time providing a brief overview of what a diverse political spectrum entails and include discussions on the differences among political leanings, prejudice, and bias so that these concepts do not become conflated. For example, broad generalizations and simplistic deconstructions need to be avoided about what conservatives or liberals believe. Rather, these concepts can be explained in a more nuanced way that encompasses the history and philosophy of Conservatism and Liberalism in the United States. Prejudice and bias can be explained as actively creating or supporting discriminatory policies based on social identities (e.g., ability, class, gender, Indigenous heritage, national origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation) that disenfranchise a certain group of people and do not encompass the values of the NASW (2017) Code of Ethics. These conversations need to continue during course work, especially in required policy and diversity classes so that a culture of respecting and embracing differing political viewpoints is reinforced. When these conversations become explicit in the classroom, they move from being avoided subtext (Quadrant 3) to an integration of important and routine topics of discussion in social work classrooms (Quadrant 1).

**Create class activities and assignments that challenge students’ beliefs**

When students are exposed to multiple viewpoints outside their own, they tend to expand their own worldview. Creating classroom activities in which students have an opportunity to engage with ideas counter to their own can help them grow developmentally and intellectually. For example, in a diversity class, students can practice having difficult conversations related to contentious subjects such as abortion, the death penalty, gay marriage, or other topical issues and can be assigned positions they must support and defend. Through this process students will be challenged to think about an issue from multiple sides and to expand their own learning and knowledge about the subject. In a policy class students could have a written assignment in which they must defend a position different from their own. For example, voter identification state laws have become a controversial political topic over the past decade, and students can be asked to write a policy memo advocating for or against a specific law. This type of assignment not only teaches students to think outside their own worldview but also helps them learn about an unfamiliar topic. The class will be learning how to think about perspectives much different from their own (Quadrant 4) and how to understand these new perspectives (Quadrant 1). At the end of the exercise, however, it is critical to make sure that students are familiar with the social work profession’s policy positions on these controversial issues adopted by the NASW (2015) Delegate Assembly. Because all students are being asked to think about the issue from
multiple sides, conservative students will be likely to feel more engaged in learning. All students are being challenged to consider viewpoints counter to their own, and social work values are provided as the foundation for understanding the profession’s positions on controversial topics.

**Encourage conservative students to write authentically**

When conservative students complete assignments for liberal professors, they often worry that they must write what they think the professor wants to read rather than write what they believe. This lack of authenticity impedes these students from learning, growing, and challenging their own beliefs. Professors need to communicate the expectation that quality of writing, analysis, critical thought, and evidenced-based writing are more important for the assignments than whether the professor agrees or disagrees with the ideas. The professor also needs to emphasize that the students must think about how their position may or may not align with social work values and how to handle the challenging inconsistencies that may arise. By creating an expectation from the first day of class about the standards of writing, professors can be more successful in helping conservative students engage with class material in a thoughtful and meaningful way. This strategy also allows professors to move from Quadrant 3, that is, knowing that the professor will not automatically downgrade a conservative student who is feeling apprehensive to share their opinions, to Quadrant 1, which is knowing that the professor will fairly assess the student’s writing and that the conservative student will feel comfortable to write about their opinions.

**Teach students to ask questions from a place of inquiry**

Creating a classroom environment in which dialogue can take place is often dependent on the questions presented in the classroom and how they are addressed. Professors must learn to address questions that may on the surface seem to create a divisive and polarizing environment. For example, if a student asks “Why would social workers be Republicans?” it would be important to find out what the student is actually asking. Probing a bit further might uncover that the student really wants to know how the Code of Ethics and social worker values can align with conservative values. This type of conversation can be productive and engage the class in a thoughtful way in which everyone can learn and enhance their ability to have difficult conversations. The professor may not have thought deeply about the question in this example, but an inquisitive standpoint can shift the class from Quadrant 4 (areas of unknown activity) to Quadrant 1 (areas of free activity). Moving into Quadrant 1 will allow deeper and more meaningful conversation in the classroom.

**Conclusions**

Reducing the prejudice gap and increasing Quadrant 1 in the classroom can have a profound impact on engaging conservative students in the classroom. By having these students actively participating in classes with their more liberal peers, a richer and more productive conversation will benefit all students. Learning about ways political dialogues are being fostered in the classroom while maintaining strategies for creating an antioppressive classroom climate, (which at times may mean helping students understand some points of view that are inconsistent with social work values), have implications for enhancing the vision of those in social work education and their ability to fulfill the mission of promoting authentic human relationships based on the dignity and worth of the person as well as integrity. Because social workers will work with a diverse set of clients with varying political ideologies, they will acquire additional tools that can be critical for any social work practice setting and enhance their ability to work with clients who may possess very different values and ethics. Humility in this process calls for faculty to acknowledge their own limitations, biases, and prejudices and approach the classroom with openness and respect. Integrating this type of faculty humility in the classroom related to political discussions is an area that needs great attention in the
research literature. Aiding faculty in developing this skill can help students acquire the tools for dialogues that will lead to innovative ways to engage in meaningful conversations across political difference. These tools will enable students to understand that social work can encompass all types of political orientations, including Republicans. It is hoped that this understanding will assist students in creating more critical and thoughtful questions that move beyond simple statements like, “Social workers can’t be Republicans.”

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