



# Workshop: Prioritizing Interpersonal Connection Post-Election

By Debra Mashek

By virtue of living in a pluralistic democracy and learning on pluralistic campuses, there are individuals all around us who think and feel differently than we do. While this viewpoint diversity is a net positive when it comes to learning, solving the world's most pressing problems, and exposing falsehoods, it can be difficult to understand or connect with political "others" who herald from an opposing tribe.

While current polls suggest a widening Biden lead, we can't know for certain who will win the election. But, here's something we do know: No matter who wins the United States presidential election on Tuesday, November 3 (or perhaps months later, if we find ourselves in a state of post-election uncertainty), some (not all) students, faculty and staff on our campuses will be disappointed.

Our opportunity as educators -- our responsibility, really -- is to help students, and ourselves, grow and engage regardless of who wins. As one step along this path, HxA created this workshop, which others are invited to adopt and adapt for use within their local contexts.

This workshop is based on the following op-ed:

Mashek, D. (2020, October 16). Avoiding Postelection Student Unrest. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/10/16/colleges-can-help-students-deal-productively-their-disappointment-and-anger>

## Workshop Agenda

Students from a broad range of political commitments are invited to participate in a 2.5-hour workshop designed to prioritize interpersonal connection as a shared source of community resilience and personal growth post-election. This workshop consists of micro-lectures, self-reflections, partnered- and group activities, and intention setting related to Election Day 2020. Individuals who complete this workshop will be able to articulate their hopes and fears related to different possible election outcomes, forecast their needs in different outcome scenarios, understand the needs of others, and set intentions about what they will do and how they will be vis a vis their relationships with others on election night and beyond.

15 Minutes	Settling In & Welcome
75 Minutes	Creating Interpersonal Connection
15 Minutes	Reflecting on Hopes and Fears, Forecasting Needs
15 Minutes	Bio Break
20 Minutes	Seeking Understanding & Common Ground
5 Minutes	Setting Intentions
5 Minutes	Closing

## Workshop Facilitation Plan

Note to facilitator: You will need the following capacities to offer this workshop as described:

- Ability to share handouts with participants (i.e., workshop agenda, instructions for the creating connection activity);
- Ability to move students into pairs that will regroup multiple times over the course of the workshop;
- Ability to present self-reflection prompts to all students (e.g., in a Zoom chat, via a shared screen, projected in the classroom);
- Ability to time activities and reflections and to signal students when to move onto the next question or activity;
- Ability to share video and audio with participants

## Settling in and welcome (15 minutes)

*Talking points:*

- Welcome!
- Why we're here: to build interpersonal connection as a shared source of community resilience.
- Individuals who complete this workshop will be able to articulate their hopes and fears related to different possible election outcomes, forecast their needs in different outcome scenarios, understand the needs of others, and set intentions about what they will *do* and how they will *be vis a vis* their relationships with others on election night and beyond.
- Constructive engagement across lines of difference is a necessity of citizenship in a pluralistic democracy.
- By virtue of living in a pluralistic democracy and learning on pluralistic campuses, there are individuals all around us who think and feel differently than we do.
- While this viewpoint diversity is a net positive when it comes to learning, solving the world's most pressing problems, and exposing falsehoods, it can be difficult to understand or connect with political "others" who herald from an opposing tribe.
- While current polls suggest a widening Biden lead, we can't know for certain who will win the election. But, here's something we do know: No matter *who* wins the United States presidential election on Tuesday, November 3 (or perhaps months later, if we find ourselves in a state of post-election uncertainty), some (not all) students, faculty and staff on our campuses will be disappointed.
- This election offers all of us an opportunity to grow and engage regardless of who wins.
- This workshop is about understanding others rather than trying to change anyone's mind.
- My expectation: We're all heading into the workshop with good intentions, ready to listen and seeking to understand.
- Recent research by Livingstone and colleagues (2020) shows that feeling understood leads to more positive behavioral intentions. Thus, helping others feel understood is a small step each of us can take toward encouraging others to engage constructively.

### *Suggested ground rules (obtained from Living Room Conversations):*

- Be curious and listen to understand. Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking. You might enjoy exploring how others' experiences have shaped their values and perspectives.
- Show respect and suspend judgment. People tend to judge one another. Setting judgment aside opens you up to learning from others and makes them feel respected and appreciated. Try to truly listen, without interruption or crosstalk.
- Note any common ground as well as any differences. Look for areas of agreement or shared values that may arise and take an interest in the differing beliefs and opinions of others.
- Be authentic and welcome that from others. Share what's important to you. Speak from your experience. Be considerate of others who are doing the same.
- Be purposeful and to the point. Do your best to keep your comments concise and relevant to the question you are answering. Be conscious of sharing airtime with other participants.
- Own and guide the conversation. Take responsibility for the quality of your participation and the conversation as a whole. Be proactive in getting yourself and others back on track if needed. Use an agreed upon signal like the "time out" sign if you feel the agreements are not being honored.

## Creating interpersonal connection (75 minutes)

**Note to facilitator:** Ideally, participants would be paired with a political "other" for this activity, although I recommend working to minimize the salience of that goal in the minds of the participants to reduce the possibility of psychological reactance. If the make-up of your campus's student body suggests there will be a good deal of ideological variance among participants, I recommend randomly assigning pairs for this activity.

That said, ensuring a wide range of political commitments in the room can be especially challenging on some campuses. If you anticipate political homogeneity among your workshop participants, you may want to collaborate with a colleague from a more diverse campus or perhaps from another area of the country to co-offer a virtual workshop.

**Activity:** Student pairs to spend approximately 45 minutes working through these questions designed to foster connection. Based on experimental social psychological research (Aron, Melinat, Vallone, & Bator, 1997), the activity offers an effective approach for creating interpersonal connection.

**Discuss:** After the students complete the reciprocal self-disclosure activity, bring them together to debrief. Suggested discussion questions include:

- What did you notice about the types of questions included here? How were these question sets organized? Key insights: progressively riskier, ask about core aspects of the self.
- What types of things did you and/or your interaction partner say or do that made you feel close? Key insights: eye contact, asked follow-up questions, nodded when I shared, shared about themselves, expressed concern.
- Did you learn something about this person you don't already know about your best friend? A close family member? Fun fact: Aron et al (1997) found this short, experimental task resulted in participants feeling closer to their interaction partner—a total stranger-- than the typical closest relationship of 30% of similar students.
- What do you think the question at the beginning and end of the handout intends to measure? [Answer: This is the Inclusion of Other in Self Scale. It is a single item pictorial measure of closeness. Although simple, it correlates with much more complex scales of feeling and behaving close and also predicts behaviors associated with closeness, such as sharing resources and taking the other person's perspective.]

- What features of this activity do you think might promote the interpersonal connection? Key insights: reciprocal, escalating, self-revealing.
- What ideas do you have for exporting these features into your daily interactions? Examples: Ask these questions of friends and family, try asking them of strangers instead of engaging in small talk, share aspects of yourself as a way of inviting others to do the same.

### *Talking points:*

- Taking the time to get to know others as individuals with hopes, dreams, and fears helps create a foundation for positive relationships across differences.
- Positive intergroup contact is a known mechanism for reducing prejudice.
- Recommendation: Do the interpersonal connection activity above with as many political “others” as possible over the coming weeks.
- Let’s watch a video of two cross-partisan friends as an example.

**Watch Video:** TEDx talk by cross-partisan friends Caitin Quattromani and Lauran Arledge.

## Reflecting on hopes and fears, forecasting needs (15 minutes)

**Self-reflection:** Next, we’re going to engage in a brief self-reflection exercise. I am going to post a series of questions in the chat. Write whatever comes to mind for approximately 2 minutes per question. After two minutes, a bell will sound, which is your signal to move on to the next question. These questions ask about possible election outcomes and anticipated reactions to them. These reflections are for your eyes only, so please be as honest and unedited as possible. Please turn off your Zoom cameras and microphones for privacy.

- Which candidate would you like to win the U.S. Presidential election? Why?
- What are you most excited about regarding the election? Most worried about?
- How would you feel if your candidate wins? Why?
- How would you feel your candidate loses? Why?
- Imagine your candidate loses. How would you most want to be treated by supporters of the other candidate?
- Imagine your candidate wins. How do you intend to treat supporters of the other candidate?
- What’s a burning question you have about people who support the other candidate? What would you ask, if you could? Phrase your question with true curiosity, not judgement.

## Seeking understanding and common ground (20 minutes)

**Review:** Workshop ground rules

**Activity:** In a moment, you will return to your breakout room with your partner. Partners will interview each other; each person will talk for five minutes while their partner listens and probes for understanding. I will post sample interview questions in the chat. Please keep an eye on the time, and I will alert you when it is time to switch roles. During these interviews, I encourage you to take some risks, to be vulnerable, and to share what you're really thinking and feeling.

- Personally, what's at stake for you in the outcome of the election? Why does this election matter to you?
- Imagine you wake up on November 4 (or several days later) to the news that your candidate won the election. How would you feel? What would you think?
- Imagine you wake up on November 4 (or several days later) to the news that your candidate. How would you feel? What would you think?
- In an ideal world how would you like to be treated by others if your candidate loses?

**Discuss:** Return participants to the large group. Ask students:

- What are you noticing about your and your partner's anticipated reactions to different election outcomes?
- Based on what your group discussed (without revealing what your partner said), what challenges do you anticipate our campus community will face, if any, after the election?

**Activity:** In a moment, you will return again to your pairs. This time, I would like the two of you to identify a shared goal related to United States politics or the election. Examples might include, "reduce polarization," "decrease political animosity," or "get more people to vote." You'll have just 3 minutes to identify a shared goal, then I'll bring everyone back to the full room. Please decide which one of you will report out your shared goal to the full room.

**Report out:** Let's hear your shared goals!

**Talking point:**

- Research suggests shared goals create cooperation between individuals from different groups.

## Setting Intentions (5 minutes)

**Self-reflection:** Next, we're going to engage in a brief self-reflection exercise. I am going to post a couple questions. As before, please write whatever comes to mind for approximately 2 minutes per prompt. After two minutes, a bell will sound, which is your signal to move on to the next question. These questions invite you to set your intentions for who and how you want to be in the days and weeks after the election. These reflections are for your eyes only, so please be as honest and unedited as possible. Please turn off your Zoom cameras and microphones for privacy.

- In order to prioritize interpersonal connection as a shared source of community resilience and growth post-election, if my candidate wins, I will...
- And, if my candidate loses, I will...
- Regardless of who wins the election, what will I do and who will I be vis a vis my relationships with others on election night and beyond?

## Closing (5 minutes)

### *Talking points:*

- While none of us can control the outcome of the election, we can choose to prioritize interpersonal connection as a shared source of community resilience and personal growth whatever the results happen to be.
- And, we can control how we respond, whether to disappointment or whatever we perceive to be good news.
- Please keep in mind that, whatever your political commitments, others in our community hold other commitments. One of the ways we can take care of ourselves and our community is setting intentions about who and how we want to be on election night and beyond.
- My hope is today's workshop provided some ideas to that end.
- Research by Parks and colleagues (Parks, Birtel, & Crisp, R., 2014) found that a single meditation intervention could reduce intergroup anxiety, improve positive attitudes, and enhance future contact intentions. And thus, in hopes of sending us all out the door with open hearts and minds, we're going to, I'm going to play a very brief mindfulness meditation.

*Closing meditation:* Play a short mindfulness meditation

*Thank yous & goodbyes!*

## Citations

Aron, A., Melinat, E., Aron, E. N., Vallone, R. D., & Bator, R. J. (1997). The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness: A Procedure and Some Preliminary Findings. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23(4), 363–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167297234003>

Livingstone, A. G., et al (2020). Do you get us? A multi-experiment, meta-analytic test of the effect of felt understanding in intergroup relations. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104028>.

Parks, S., Birtel, M., & Crisp, R. (2014). Evidence That a Brief Meditation Exercise Can Reduce Prejudice Toward Homeless People. *Social Psychology*, 45, 458-465. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000212>.