# Teaching Virtue Virtually: Can the Virtues of Tolerance of Diversity of Conscience Be Taught Online?

## Marcy Van Fossen, Fr. James P. Burns, Thomas Lickona and Brother Larry Schatz

**Abstract**

This study focused on the virtue of tolerance as it relates to an often-neglected area of diversity—*diversity of conscience*—defined as "legitimate differences of moral and religious conscience" (Lickona, 2006). This merits exploration because tolerance is essential for fostering civility in our increasingly diverse societies and for promoting the free exchange of perspectives that is central to the mission of higher education. An online workshop taught this concept and presented the cardinal virtues as accountability parameters for civil dialogue. The results from pre- and post-workshop questionnaires support this modality as a useful first step in teaching tolerance of diversity of conscience.

**Introduction**

University campuses are being enriched by an increasing diversity in the student body (Stolzenberg, 2019). However, there are also concerning trends including polarization and difficulties in civil discourse on college campuses (Anderson, 2020; Beck, 2018; Duffy, 2012, 2013; The Knight Foundation, 2018; Levin, 2020). A recent study surveyed students from hundreds of U.S. colleges and universities and found that sixty-two percent reported that students are reluctant to state their views in the classroom due to a perceived campus culture that does not support viewpoint diversity (Stiksma, 2021). The most common reasons for students' reticence were that other students or professors would criticize their views as offensive or wrong. The richness of a diverse community is most fully realized in a culture that promotes an open and respectful exchange of ideas—including on matters of legitimate disagreement. Universities can promote the kind of environment in which, as John Henry Newman (1976) envisioned, the liberally educated student "has taken a survey of all knowledge … [and] has gained from them a special illumination and largeness of mind" (p. 166–167). The UK's Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, an internationally-recognized leader in promoting character and virtue education, shares a similarly hopeful vision of what is possible in the university setting:

> Through their time at university, students are inducted into an intellectual culture that shapes them to critically and fairly evaluate evidence and arguments of different kinds. They are expected to engage respectfully and conscientiously with those with whom they disagree and grow in the creativity, discernment and good judgement required to formulate hypotheses, evaluate evidence, construct arguments and draw fitting conclusions from complex analyses and debate. (The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2020, p. 4)

There is an opportunity within virtue education to teach and model respectful, meaningful dialogue between individuals and between groups—no matter how polarized—in our universities, schools, and society at large. How might we begin to operationalize respectful, reasoned, and compassionate discourse between people with fundamental differences in their core values and/or in how they apply those values to particular issues? This initial targeted study proposes that a possible first step is understanding and practicing the virtue of tolerance of diversity of conscience (Lickona, 2006). Our research examines whether an online modality can be effective for teaching this concept, while utilizing the cardinal virtues as parameters for civil discourse—all in the service of facilitating deeper dialogue and understanding between persons and ultimately strengthening the norm of civility on which democratic discourse depends.

**The Virtue of Tolerance**

In raising the issue of tolerance, much less teaching it, we stand at the fragile edge of many people's comfort zone. In part, this is due to the vastly different ways that tolerance has been regarded. Some see tolerance as an essential interpersonal and societal virtue, while others consider "being tolerated" an insult (Forst, 2017). The varying responses that the notion of tolerance evokes reflect the fact that tolerance often involves disagreement. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "the term 'toleration'—from the Latin *tolerate*: to put up with, countenance or suffer—generally refers to the conditional acceptance of or non-interference with beliefs, actions or practices that one considers to be wrong but still 'tolerable,' such that they should not be prohibited or constrained" (Forst, 2017, p. 1).

Heyd (2001), in *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue*, maintained that tolerance is not putting up with what is clearly immoral (such as genocide), nor is it indifference to a particular moral issue under

consideration. He argued that the definition of tolerance has evolved over time; in today's culture, he said, we expect people to be treated equitably—not out of mere toleration, but out of basic fairness. From this perspective, we would not label as "tolerance" the mere recognition of that which ought to be self-evident, such as the rights of minorities. In the contemporary context, we tend to view tolerance as applying more to matters of moral or intellectual disagreement —matters where what is right or true is contested. Understood in this narrower way, tolerance applies to ethical, political, and religious disagreements, but not to things that are generally considered to be morally irrelevant such as the color of one's skin (Horton, 2001, p. 34).

We think, however, that it is still useful, even necessary, to speak of tolerance more broadly in the sense of simply coexisting or "getting along" with people who are in some way different from us, whatever the nature of that difference. For example, the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (Unabridged Edition, 1967) gives, as its first definition of tolerance, "a fair and objective attitude toward those whose opinions, practices, race, religion, nationality, etc., differ from one's own: freedom from bigotry." Tolerance in this basic sense makes it possible, despite differences, for people to live together respectfully and peacefully; it is the opposite of prejudice, hatred, violence, terrorism, exclusion, and any kind of unjust treatment. In the world today, we are right to worry about growing racial supremacy movements and increasing persecution of religious minorities. For this reason, educational programs that teach tolerance do well to include teaching this virtue in its wider sense of "live and let live" and to define intolerance broadly to include all the forms of hostile attitudes and behaviors that, despite being self-evidently irrational or immoral, continue to threaten individual rights and the common good. As we speak, people around the world are being silenced, harassed, jailed (or worse), and otherwise deprived of their human rights simply because they are different in some way.

Another, more subtle threat to tolerance is arguably growing in our time, namely, allowing tolerance to become indifference. Heyd speaks to this danger:

> The modern conception [of tolerance], which rests on easy acceptance of the heterogeneity of values and ways of life, pushes the concept of tolerance dangerously close to that of indifference. And even if … welcomed by the moral pluralist … much of the original intrinsic value of tolerance is put under threat. (Heyd, 2001, p. 4)

There is no need to tolerate that to which one is indifferent (Williams, 2001, p. 20). In the spirit of not offending others, some well-intentioned people try to occupy a politically safe zone of moral neutrality with respect to a particular ethical issue by not committing to, or perhaps never personally formulating, a position. However, this is indifference not tolerance, and neutrality regarding ethical issues is not always without consequence.[1] Faith-based educational institutions, by definition, must define tolerance within their communities as distinct from indifference because they make available (they do not mandate) a particular worldview to help inform students' search for truth and guide ethical decision making (see Burns & Hahn, 2020, for a discussion of faith-based education). Students and other members of the educational community may or may not embrace the views of that faith tradition. Still, they encounter a set of beliefs with which they can agree or disagree, and question or wrestle with in discussions that move them to deeper reflection about ethical matters that may affect their lives.

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[1] One example of the danger of indifference in the name of tolerance can be seen in modern societies where sex has arguably become a "moral free zone," where virtually everything is to be tolerated except sexual assault and other failures to get consent. Tolerance regarding sexual behavior has come to mean almost total nonjudgementalism. In reaction to this, some scholars (e.g., Eberstadt, 2012; Wilcox, 2011) have argued that the resulting normlessness concerning sex has had dire societal consequences, including the exploitation of women, the weakening of marriage and family, the negative effects on children's welfare and development, and other individual and societal problems. From this perspective, excessive tolerance in the form of indifference to sexual morality—which, among other things, called for sexual self-control and taking responsibility for the children one brings into the world—has carried a high social cost.

**When Consciences Conflict**

In this paper, we focus on a particular aspect of tolerance we think has been neglected: respect for diversity of conscience, defined as legitimate differences of moral and religious conscience. This kind of tolerance is what enables people to dialogue respectfully when their consciences come into conflict.

Clearly, what constitutes "legitimate differences" of moral and religious conscience can be debated. We define them as those differences that would generally be regarded as legitimate by the standards of reason and basic fairness. For example, most persons would not judge as legitimate the position that people ought to be treated differently based on their sex, race, or religion. Individuals might legitimately disagree, however, on the best ways to avoid unjust racial, religious, and gender discrimination and to ensure the fair and equal treatment of all citizens. Individuals also might, in good conscience, disagree on how the standard of equal treatment should be applied in particular cases. A current example of that sort of disagreement is the debate about whether it is fair to allow transgendered athletes who were originally biological males (typically giving them certain physical advantages) to compete with biologically female athletes, or whether there should be separate competitions.

In order to educate for tolerance of diversity of conscience, one needs to address common misunderstandings of tolerance. One is being confused about what we are supposed to tolerate. Ethically speaking, people are not meant to be tolerated; people are meant to be loved, and their inherent dignity and rights respected. However, we are not called to love, respect, and agree with other people's every idea, belief, and behavior. We may choose to agree with them or not. If we disagree with particular beliefs and behaviors, those beliefs and behaviors are candidates for toleration—permitting or putting up with them even if we regard them as wrongheaded—provided

they do not violate the rights of others. Moreover, requiring acceptance of the other person's views would clearly be a nonstarter for any conversation about controversial issues where a precondition of accepting the other person's views might be impossible. In such cases, defining tolerance as acceptance could have the effect of preventing rather than facilitating constructive dialogue. Sometimes a meaningful sharing of ideas requires honest acknowledgment that two parties deeply disagree and may remain set in their positions, yet are open to understanding the other person's point of view.

Critical to understand, especially regarding the current study, is that the <u>virtue</u> of tolerance is what "emphasises the moral good involved in putting up with beliefs one finds offensive" (Williams, 2001, p. 19). This may involve an appeal to our higher-order goals, such as ensuring that others have "the common good that is their due," valuing the "autonomy" of self and others, and "social peace" (Bowlin, 2016, pp. 126–127), as well as love of one's neighbor (see Bowlin, 2016, pp. 206–241 for discussion). By contrast, tolerance that is simply "indifference and 'Hobbesian'[2] compromise … [or] merely a political arrangement" (Heyd, 2001, p. 5) is not a virtue.

Clearly, not all tolerance is intrinsically good (e.g., tolerating human rights violations) much less a human excellence. Properly understood, tolerance is a moral virtue that is subsidiary to the cardinal virtue of justice. For tolerance to be a virtue, it must give others their due and, ultimately, do so in the service of love. As Thomas Aquinas repeatedly asserted, "Charity (love) is the form of the virtues" (II-II.23.8). At minimum, tolerance can be seen as an aspect of love as well as justice since one must have a certain amount of charitable regard for the other person to bother disagreeing with them, to risk engaging in a dialogue of opposing viewpoints, or to try to understand their point of

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[2] A reference to Williams's (2001) discussion of Hobbesian compromise as an unstable balance of (political) power that is practical rather than principled, "under which the acceptance of one group by the other is the best that either of them can get" (pp. 21–22).

view. A fuller expression of love would be to tolerate as a way of loving one's neighbor as oneself. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin makes this point in his book, *A Code of Jewish Ethics, Vol. 2* (2009): "Justice and tolerance, the virtues that demand from us fairness and respect, are also based on the love we should feel for those, like ourselves, created in the image of God" (p. 2).

In summary, tolerance often involves disagreement, including moral disagreement, but that is the honest starting point of some conversations involving conflicting core beliefs or values. The claim to love a person while not accepting some of their beliefs or behaviors is not a specious distinction. Real-life examples abound, as evidenced by the 2020 United States presidential election, when many (on both sides) had the lived experience of maintaining loving relationships with friends or family members while deeply disagreeing with, but nevertheless tolerating, their voting choice.

**Diversity of Conscience**

Diversity in general is hailed as a valued component of the educational experience by institutions of higher learning. This belief stems from appreciating that we all have much to learn from those who differ from ourselves, especially on university campuses (Lehto et al., 2014). In this spirit, universities have historically aspired to be beacons of plurality where students of varying viewpoints can engage in mutually beneficial exchanges. In higher education, students have been able to learn important lessons not only in the classroom but also outside the classroom especially in personal relationships, such as the development of communication skills that are highly valued by employers (Arthur et al., 2009). Such skills are cultivated through opportunities to engage in dialogue and see things through a different lens. These encounters may lead one to revise one's original views, to simply understand another human being better, or to clarify one's own views more fully in the light of a contrasting perspective.

In part, the open exchange of ideas is valued as an avenue for students to discern truth from falsehood. In his State of the University address, Princeton University president, Christopher Eisgruber (2021) addressed how this is currently being challenged:

> This University will fail in its scholarly and educational mission if we become an echo chamber in which viewpoints go unchallenged simply because they are popular amongst groups dominant on the campus. We will also fail, however, if we treat all opinions as equally legitimate… . Our commitment to free speech may require us to treat even very offensive viewpoints as exempt from censorship or punishment, but it does not require us to treat all viewpoints as morally equivalent … . Free speech affects *how* we pass such judgements, not *whether* we can do so—indeed, it is designed to facilitate (among other things) judgments about truth and morality. (p. 5)

Unfortunately, in what has come to be called the "cancel culture," universities have increasingly seen invited speakers disinvited because of objections by some faculty, students, or alums to the speaker's views. In their much-discussed article, "The Coddling of the American Mind," constitutional lawyer Greg Lukianoff and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2015) report that between 2000 and 2015 more than 240 campaigns were launched to prevent public figures from speaking at campus events. The risk of protecting students from unpopular views is that critical thinking, robust debate, and the courage to take an unpopular stand may become the endangered species of campus life.

In this kind of anti-intellectual climate, clearly antithetical to the core mission of a university[3], teaching tolerance for diversity of conscience takes on even greater urgency. It represents one concrete, focused way we can work to restore campus cultures that promote a free and open

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[3] The core mission of universities is generally understood to be research, teaching/learning, and service.

exchange of ideas and the intellectual growth that comes from that. Additionally, universities can invite speakers who respectfully discuss differences of opinion and present well-reasoned arguments about difficult topics. This models civil debate for the students and respects students' ability to critically evaluate and assess multiple perspectives.[4]

Teaching tolerance for diversity of conscience has another crucial purpose: preparing students to participate effectively in the ever more pluralistic world they are about to enter. Exposure to diversity helps equip students with the skills to flourish in a global society (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). University students must graduate with the ability to engage in respectful and meaningful civil discourse and be able to apply critical thinking skills to deeply-held beliefs in the areas of religion, ethics/morality, and politics. As one of the authors of this paper puts it:

In the 21st century, more than ever, educating for democracy requires that schools form citizens who can live harmoniously in an increasingly diverse society. But educating for diversity must have, as a core commitment, teaching respect for diversity of conscience. It must include the explicit recognition that persons of conscience may disagree, even profoundly, about issues ranging from personal moral choices to public policy. In a democratic society, an authentic respect for diversity enables us to live with our deepest differences, even as we continue to debate them. (Lickona, 2006, p. 1)

Preparing students to function in a pluralistic world begins with an awareness that truly valuing diversity means that we welcome everyone to the table and hold the ensuing discussions accountable to standards of reason and goodwill. This may not result in agreement among participants, but it will

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[4] For a discussion of how some Catholic universities balance their faith-based mission with campus speakers, see Desmond, 2017.

likely result in a forthright encounter between persons who would better understand each other at the level of some core beliefs.

**Freedom of Conscience**

Conscience is defined as "the sense or consciousness of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one's own conduct, intentions, or character together with a feeling of obligation to do right or be good" (*Merriam-Webster*, 2020). The Catholic intellectual tradition understands conscience in the following manner.

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment. . . . For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. . . . His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1776)

Evident in both the secular and the religious understanding of conscience is the deep, inner experience of conviction of the moral valence of a particular action. This inner conviction is taken very seriously and even given primacy by virtually all religious and nonreligious thinkers (Kreeft, 2004; Pope Francis, 2017; Smith, 1998). This is because acting contrary to one's own conscience is, by definition, doing what one thinks is wrong (i.e., evil and personally corrupting). However, this does not mean that conscience is infallible, and philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas have carefully described one's moral responsibility in forming one's conscience and being informed regarding relevant factors impacting a particular decision.

For any society to prosper, it is necessary that some limits are placed on the freedom of individuals. This assumption underlies all laws and governmental regulations. Likewise, freedom of conscience has limits: "It is the liberty to make personal moral choices as long as those choices do

not infringe on the rights of others or undermine the common good" (Lickona, 2006, p. 2). This is an important qualification because it does not shelter inherent evils, such as terrorism or racism, under the protective umbrella of freedom of conscience. The limits to freedom of conscience help us define what is reasonable to try to discuss civilly so that, upon this foundation, parameters or rules for engagement can be built.

**The Cardinal Virtues as Parameters for Civil Discourse**

This study proposes the cardinal virtues as guidelines for civil discourse because these virtues provide safe parameters for discussion, hold participants accountable to a positive standard, and promote civility and fairness. For several reasons, the cardinal virtues of prudence (wisdom), justice (fairness), courage (fortitude), and temperance (self-control) have been shown to form the basic ground rules for civil discourse. First, they are transhistorical, having their roots in the philosophy of ancient Greece (as well as in other cultures under varying names), and consequently, have the endorsement of longevity along with some of the world's greatest minds such as Plato and Aristotle. Relatedly, these virtues can be understood and valued via reason alone and are considered "natural" virtues in the sense that they can be obtained and developed by one's own efforts. As such, these virtues appeal to secular and religious thinkers alike. Third, there is a growing body of research confirming the cross-cultural value and existence of these basic virtues in all cultures and philosophical traditions (McGrath, 2015; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Fourth, prudence, temperance, courage, and justice are understood as foundational, such that all other natural virtues can be understood as somehow subsidiary to one of these cardinal (i.e, "hinge") virtues. Fifth, these virtues are consistent with a variety of faith-based educational institutions as well as those with a commitment to character education.

The cardinal virtues are widely recognized as representing excellence in human behavior. How might they be applied to provide parameters for civil discourse? One might exercise the virtue of prudence by wisely choosing the time and place to discuss the controversial topic or use humor to diffuse tension. The self-control of temperance might look like using good manners or pausing to take time to think after being challenged. An example of courage might be daring to share one's view and really listen to another person's views—or perhaps even modify one's original view. Finally, justice is giving the other person their due. As applied to civil discourse, justice might steer one toward the goal of understanding the other person rather than convincing that person of one's own views. Justice might also lead one to admit one's own mistakes. Offering the cardinal virtues as parameters for civil discourse is a way to provide a common language and framework for the university community—a framework in which personal accountability and public accountability, as they relate to civil discourse, can begin to have a common point of reference.

**Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

Seventy undergraduate students took part in this study. The opportunity to participate was offered to every student involved in a leadership position (i.e., student senate, resident assistants, tutors, etc.) at a predominantly undergraduate residential campus of a midsize university in the midwestern United States. In total, 259 students were invited to participate in the study; 70 accepted, yielding a response rate of 26 percent.

The overarching intent of this study was to determine whether the concept of tolerance of diversity of conscience could be effectively taught by means of an online workshop, and to obtain feedback regarding whether students found the workshop information to be helpful. This data will be used to determine whether to educate the wider university community about diversity of conscience in an

effort to promote tolerance and civil dialogue among community members. The specific educational goals of the workshops were to (a) define diversity of conscience, (b) discuss the limits of freedom of conscience, (c) differentiate between tolerance and acceptance, and (d) present how the cardinal virtues can serve as accountability parameters for civil dialogue. The workshop consisted of a 15-minute online narrated slide presentation with an embedded 3-minute whiteboard illustration video (see Appendix A for links to both videos and Appendix B for a transcript of the whiteboard video). In order to assess workshop effectiveness, students were asked to complete pre- and post-workshop questionnaires. The study was conducted during the spring and fall semesters of 2020 on the main campus of a midsize faith-based university. Of note, both semesters involved a university-wide shift to distance learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Measures**

A five-item pre-workshop questionnaire was constructed for this study and administered at the beginning of the workshop directly after participants signed the Informed Consent form. Its purpose was to obtain students' baseline familiarity with the concepts ("I know what diversity of conscience is, and I could explain it to someone," "I can describe the difference between acceptance and tolerance," and "People should be able to pursue the dictates of their conscience with total freedom") and to assess baseline optimism about having controversial conversations ("I feel hopeless about trying to talk to someone who disagrees with me on a controversial topic," and "I feel optimistic that I have the tools to help people who disagree talk respectfully about a controversial topic"). Participants indicated their responses on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale.

Two post-workshop questionnaires were also constructed for this study to be completed directly after viewing the workshop. The first questionnaire included the same five items from the pre-

workshop questionnaire to assess self-reported learning of the concepts. In addition, four questions were added to assess perceived helpfulness of the concepts and the workshop ("I would rather have a conversation about a controversial topic with someone who knew about tolerance for diversity of conscience than with someone who had never heard of it," "Tolerance of diversity of conscience is not a very helpful concept," "If both people are committed to practicing tolerance of diversity of conscience and using the cardinal virtues as ground rules for civil dialogue, they should be able to discuss controversial topics with respect and civility," and "I found this workshop to be helpful"). Participants indicated their responses on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale.

Finally, a four-item questionnaire was administered at this time to assess whether participants could demonstrate application of the concepts. This was done via four vignettes, each of which illustrated a different reason for breakdown in civil dialogue. For these items, participants indicated the relevant concept involved in the failure of dialogue: respect for each other's right of freedom of conscience, the difference between acceptance and tolerance, understanding the limits of freedom of conscience, and how to use the cardinal virtues as ground rules for civil dialogue (Appendix C).

**Results**

In our main analyses, we assessed workshop effectiveness of the five matching pre- and post-test questions using paired $t$ tests. We also assessed effectiveness by examining students' ability to correctly apply the concepts covered in the workshops, measured as the percentage of correct responses to each of four multiple-choice questions. Additional analyses examined student perceptions of workshop helpfulness by calculating the mean responses to three questions that used seven-point Likert rating scales. Finally, post hoc analyses were conducted to assess whether course effectiveness scores on the five post-test items were related to student ability to correctly apply core concepts. For these analyses, we used independent sample $t$ tests, dividing students into those who

responded correctly to each of the four multiple-choice questions and those who responded incorrectly. The dependent variables for each of these questions were the five posttest items.

For both the paired and independent sample $t$ tests, we assessed statistical significance using sample-based standard error estimates as well as boot-strapped standard error estimates based on 2,000 replications to control for non-normality. The boot-strapped standard errors and significance tests based on them matched the sample-based significance tests with no substantive differences in whether a given result was significant or nonsignificant. Consequently, all results reported below use the sample-based standard errors, $t$ values, and significance tests. Similarly, Levene's test of the equivalence of group variances was also run for each $t$ test. As none of these variance comparisons were significant, we report the $t$ test results that assume equivalent sub-group variances.

**Perceived Workshop Effectiveness**

There was a significant increase in students' perceived knowledge of and ability to explain the concept of diversity of conscience after viewing the workshop ($M = 4.9$, $SD = 1.8$), compared to before viewing ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 1.6$), $t(64) = -6.3$, $p = .000$. There were also significant increases in students' perceived ability to describe the difference between acceptance and tolerance after the workshop ($M = 6.1$, $SD = .74$) versus before ($M = 5.7$, $SD = 1.0$), $t(63) = -2.3$, $p = .02$, and optimism about having the tools to help people who disagree talk respectfully about a controversial topic, after the workshop ($M = 5.9$, $SD = 1.1$) versus before ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.3$), $t(63) = -6.6$, $p = .000$. A surprising finding was an increase in students' feelings of hopelessness in trying to talk with someone who disagrees on a controversial topic, after the workshop ($M = 5.4$, $SD = 1.5$) versus before ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 1.6$), $t(62) = -4.2$, $p = .000$. Finally, there was not a significant change in students' opinions regarding whether people should be able to pursue the dictates of their

conscience with total freedom after the workshop (*M* = 3.6, *SD* = 1.8) versus before (*M* = 3.7, *SD* = 1.6), *t*(63) = .90, *p* = .37.

**Table 1**

*t Test Results for Paired Pre- and Post-items*

| Variable | Mean | SD | df | *t* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Can explain tolerance of diversity of conscience | -1.7 | 2.2 | 64 | -6.3 | .000 |
| Can describe difference between acceptance and tolerance | -.33 | 1.1 | 63 | -2.3 | .02 |
| Hopeless when it comes to disagreement | -.87 | 1.6 | 62 | -4.2 | .000 |
| Should follow conscience with total freedom | .16 | 1.4 | 63 | .90 | .37 |
| Optimistic I have tools to help people who disagree | -1.1 | 1.3 | 63 | -6.6 | .000 |

*Note*: Significance is 2-tailed.

**Applied Measure of Workshop Effectiveness**

Analysis of students' ability to apply the concepts after viewing the workshop revealed that the majority of students were able to apply the concepts to practical scenarios successfully, including: respect for the right to freedom of conscience (67% applied correctly; *n* = 64, correct = 43, incorrect = 21); the difference between acceptance and tolerance (91% applied correctly; *n* = 64, correct = 58,

incorrect = 6); the limits of freedom of conscience (78% applied correctly; $n$ = 64, correct = 50, incorrect = 14); and the cardinal virtues as ground rules for civil dialogue (67% applied correctly; $n$ = 64, correct = 43, incorrect = 21).

**Perceived Workshop Helpfulness**

Analysis of the mean scores for perceived workshop helpfulness yielded mixed results. As indicated on a seven-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating the student found the course more helpful, the students reported finding the workshop to be helpful overall ($M$ = 5.6, SD = 1.3). In addition, they believed that if both people are committed to practicing tolerance of diversity of conscience and to using the cardinal virtues as ground rules for civil dialogue, they should be able to discuss controversial topics with respect and civility ($M$ = 6.2, SD = 1.1). However, students also reported that tolerance of diversity of conscience is not a very helpful concept ($M$ = 5.1, SD = 2.3) and were neutral, tending toward mild disagreement, regarding whether they would rather have a conversation about a controversial topic with someone who knew about tolerance of diversity of conscience than with someone who had never heard of it ($M$ = 3.3, SD = 2.2). We did not find any statistically significant differences on the mean post-test item scores between students who answered the conceptual questions correctly versus those who answered incorrectly. As such, students' opinions about the helpfulness of the workshop were not related to whether or not they could correctly apply the concepts.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics*

| Variable | N | Mean | SD |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (Pre-) Can explain tolerance of diversity of conscience | 70 | 3.3 | 1.6 |
| (Pre-) Can describe difference between acceptance and tolerance | 69 | 5.7 | 1.0 |
| (Pre-) Hopeless when it comes to disagreement | 68 | 4.4 | 1.6 |
| (Pre-) Should follow conscience with total freedom | 69 | 3.8 | 1.7 |
| (Pre-) Optimistic I have tools to help people who disagree | 68 | 4.9 | 1.3 |
| (Post-) If committed to these concepts, people can talk with civility | 65 | 6.2 | 1.1 |
| (Post-) Rather have a controversial talk with someone who knows about these concepts | 65 | 3.3 | 2.2 |
| (Post-) Tolerance of diversity of conscience is not a helpful concept | 65 | 5.1 | 2.3 |
| (Post-) Hopeless when it comes to disagreement | 65 | 5.3 | 1.5 |
| (Post-) Optimistic I have tools to help people who disagree | 65 | 5.9 | 1.0 |
| (Post-) Can explain tolerance of diversity of conscience | 65 | 4.9 | 1.8 |
| (Post-) Should follow conscience with total freedom | 65 | 3.6 | 1.8 |
| (Post-) Can describe difference between acceptance and tolerance | 65 | 6.1 | .75 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (Post-) Workshop was helpful | 64 | 5.6 | 1.3 |

*Note*: Means differ slightly from text and Table 2 due to different *n*'s (pairs with missing data were excluded from *t* tests)

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This study found that the concept of tolerance of diversity of conscience could be effectively taught through the medium of an online workshop. This was demonstrated by both self-reported understanding of the concepts and applied knowledge of the concepts. After taking the workshop, students believed they were better able to explain the concepts and help people talk respectfully with each other about a controversial topic. Further, they could apply the concepts from the workshop: respect for the right to freedom of conscience, the difference between acceptance and tolerance, the limits of freedom of conscience, and the cardinal virtues as ground rules for civil dialogue. Additionally, students believed that the workshop was helpful. They also believed that if people are committed to practicing tolerance of diversity of conscience and the cardinal virtues, they should be able to discuss controversial topics with respect and civility.

A paradoxical finding was that students' self-reported optimism and hopelessness both increased after the workshop. Hope (not hopelessness) and optimism are typically positively correlated (Steed, 2002). One explanation for our finding might be that the hopelessness item in our questionnaire ("I feel hopeless about trying to talk to someone who disagrees with me on a controversial topic") measured one's own perceived ability in a controversial conversation while the optimism item ("I feel optimistic that I have the tools to help people who disagree talk respectfully about a controversial topic") measured one's perceived ability to help others. Another explanation is that the workshop may have made salient the challenges of having controversial conversations, whereas,

before the workshop, such complexities were not in the forefront of students' minds. Students may well have ended the workshop optimistic that they have the tools to help others, while simultaneously feeling the challenges of having controversial conversations to be daunting. This will be important to evaluate in future research because there is some evidence that hopelessness is negatively correlated with social engagement (Zhang, Liu, Tang, & Dong, 2018).

Another unanticipated finding was that students mildly agreed that tolerance of diversity of conscience was not a helpful concept, even though they found the workshop to be helpful overall and felt that people who understood the concepts should be able to have controversial conversations respectfully with each other. It may be that, considered as an isolated concept, tolerance of diversity of conscience seems less helpful to students than when it is contextualized and applied within the wider workshop, which includes an explanation of conscience and ground rules for dialogue. It may also be that for most students the phrases "tolerance of diversity of conscience" and "legitimate differences of moral and religious conscience" remained abstractions whose meanings were not fully understood. The workshop gave only brief examples of legitimate differences of conscience (in the whiteboard video). In retrospect, we think we should have done more. The whiteboard video, for instance, could have shown a substantive exchange of views between two persons who disagreed about a particular issue but did so in a way that exemplified respectful speaking and listening-to-understand—in short, what the practice of tolerance of diversity of conscience actually looks and sounds like.

**Study Limitations**

A limitation of this study was the limited sample and the unusual condition of distance learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Students likely participated in this study under some distress due to the unprecedented circumstances of an international pandemic and resultant distance learning for part

of the academic semester. Future research is needed to assess a wider demographic of students and of the university including faculty and staff. In addition, this study suffers from a problem common to many character and virtue program evaluations—the lack of measured behavioral outcomes (Was, Woltz, & Drew, 2006). We assessed knowledge of concepts and application of concepts but did not triangulate the findings with other behavioral outcomes. We expect that it is unlikely that the 15-minute workshop would result in significant and lasting behavioral change unless it is nested in an educational culture where others value and practice tolerance of diversity of conscience and engage in virtuous discourse. It is our hope that this workshop plants a seed, or offers a shift in perspective, that can grow over time.

Toward this end, offering a follow-up, in-person workshop would allow for an opportunity to practice the skills presented online. Students could start with a mildly controversial topic (e.g., whether the electoral college should be abolished) and move to progressively more charged ones (e.g., should a president be impeached for inciting insurrection). Better still, student pairs could choose from a menu of topics to discuss. Supervised practice might increase the likelihood that the concepts will be generalized to relationships and conversations beyond the workshop. Finally, devising a plan for a cohort of students and following up on them over time would be beneficial to determine long term benefits of this training.

**Revisiting Tolerance of Diversity of Conscience**

Defining and defending the virtue of tolerance is necessary because there is little chance for deep interpersonal understanding when dialogue breaks down in hostility or never even begins due to polarization, shaming, or fear. One cannot coerce a meaningful exchange of ideas let alone a change of heart in another person. Tolerance allows people to stay in communication and this study

suggests it can lead to greater openness about and deeper conversations related to the matters that divide us.

Institutions of higher education can help to increase tolerance in students, especially through an institutional commitment to diversity (Himbeault Taylor, 1998). Moreover, it is well-established that virtue can be taught, as well as "caught," in the educational milieu (Arthur et al., 2017). The findings of our study suggest that this may well be the case with regard to the virtue of tolerance as it relates to diversity of conscience. Practicing the virtue of tolerance in combination with the cardinal virtues (as ground rules for civil discourse) may facilitate more open dialogue because both parties can share their positions while respecting the moral obligation of each person to earnestly follow his or her own conscience. Such conversations, even if concluded by agreeing to disagree, still exemplify a coming together in communication through interpersonal connection and an open dialogue that prepares students to engage meaningfully in an increasingly diverse society.

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**Appendix A: Tolerance of Diversity of Conscience Online Workshop and Whiteboard**

**Videos**

The complete 15-minute Tolerance of Diversity of Conscience Workshop, including the 3-minute whiteboard video, is available online.

http://www2.cortland.edu/centers/character/video/workshop-on-tolerance-of-diversity-of-conscience-smumn%20(with%20CC).mp4/

The 3-minute whiteboard illustration video is available online at SUNY-Cortland's website, Center for the 4th and 5th Rs.

https://www2.cortland.edu/centers/character/video/ClosedcaptionedToleranceofDiversityofConscienceVideo.mp4

*Tolerance of Diversity of Conscience*

Diversity makes the world a richer, more interesting place. It enhances our relationships.

Educational institutions highly value diversity because our differences give us opportunities to learn from each other and to grow as people.

But sometimes we differ when it comes to our opinions on issues near and dear to our hearts.

We call this kind of diversity *Diversity of Conscience* because people of goodwill can search their conscience and earnestly disagree about what they think is right and wrong.

> [Examples given: abortion, euthanasia, birth control, divorce, sexual orientation, death
>
> penalty, political affiliation, gender identity, religious affiliation, sexual behavior outside
>
> of marriage, cohabitation before marriage, and parenting practices]

*What can we do?*

The solution is to practice **tolerance** through appreciation of each other's **freedom of conscience**. This means respecting legitimate differences of moral and religious conscience.

Does this mean we should "tolerate" the views of a racist or a terrorist?

No. Freedom of conscience has limits.

Legitimate freedom of conscience is "the liberty to make personal moral choices as long as those choices do not infringe on the rights of others or undermine the common good" (Thomas Lickona).

Tolerance of diversity of conscience makes it possible for us to talk about controversial subjects in safety. By doing so, we respect each other, and we respect one another's right to follow one's own conscience—even if we do not agree.

How is this different from "acceptance"?

Acceptance connotes _agreement_ with someone else's values, beliefs, or behavioral choices.

But **tolerance** is what we need when we honestly _disagree_.

Even when, in good conscience, we disagree, we still strive to love and respect the other person.

Without tolerance of diversity of conscience, we can end up unfairly accusing others of "hate" or of "being a bigot" or of "lacking a moral compass" because they disagree with what _we_ think is right.

When we do that, we are really saying, "I have a right to follow *my* conscience, but you don't have a right to follow *yours*!"

Honest differences about controversial issues shouldn't lead to one side silencing or shaming the other. If we love and respect each other as persons, we'll stand up for <u>everyone's</u> freedom of moral and religious conscience.

This kind of mutual respect enables us to discuss and debate tough issues without anger or alienation.

In respectful dialogue, we seek first to understand each other. New understandings may lead us to modify our original views. Or, at the end of the day, we might agree to disagree and to live with our deepest differences of conscience.

Either way, if we respect diversity of conscience, no matter what the issue, we'll keep good will and civility alive.

Communities that embrace tolerance of diversity of conscience display open dialogue, humility by learning to listen better, more authentic diversity, and greater compassion and understanding between people.

**This is who we are.**

**Appendix C: Diversity Workshop Post-Workshop Questionnaire**

The following are examples of situations in which controversial topics resulted in an impasse in conversation or mutual understanding. For each vignette, please indicate the option that **best describes what is misunderstood by Person A.** If you are not certain, please make your best estimate. Thank you for your participation.

1) <u>Person A</u> learns that his church is splitting due to deep disagreement over issues related to sexual orientation. He says to a friend, "I've attended this church since I was a child and everyone seems so nice. I had no idea that so many of them are hateful."

**Which *best* describes what is misunderstood by Person A in this example?**

    a.   Respect for each other's right to freedom of conscience

    b.   How to use the cardinal virtues as ground rules for civil dialogue

    c.   The difference between acceptance and tolerance

    d.   The limits of freedom of conscience

2) <u>Person A</u> and Person B are discussing a recent pro-life demonstration.  They are on opposite sides of the issue, but have been friends for many years and trust that one another's views come from a deep place of caring and careful discernment. After a heated but respectful conversation, Person B says, "Well, at least we can agree to have tolerance for each other's views." To which <u>Person A</u> replies, "I don't like the word 'tolerance,' I prefer to say 'acceptance'."

**Which *best* describes what is misunderstood by Person A in this example?**

a. The limits of freedom of conscience

b. The difference between acceptance and tolerance

c. How to use the cardinal virtues as ground rules for civil dialogue

d. Respect for each other's right to freedom of conscience

3) <u>Person A</u> feels naturally inclined to "live and let live." It is easy for him to be lovingly open-minded toward other people's life choices. Upon learning the concept of tolerance of freedom of conscience, he embraced it and inspired others to do the same. However, when one of his friends challenged him by saying, "That all sounds nice, but how can I possibly 'tolerate' a suicide bomber acting on his conscience?", <u>Person A</u> didn't know what to say.

**Which *best* describes what is misunderstood by Person A in this example?**

a. How to use the cardinal virtues as ground rules for civil dialogue

b. The difference between acceptance and tolerance

c. The limits of freedom of conscience

d. Failure to understand tolerance as a virtue

4) <u>Person A</u> dreads his family holiday gatherings because invariably the conversation turns to religion and politics. Vastly different views are deeply held by members of the group. The family members love each other and respect that the views represented reflect the dictates of each person's conscience. Still, what starts as a friendly conversation always seems to end up degenerating into angry accusations and name calling.

**Which *best* describes what is misunderstood by Person A's family in this example?**

a. Respect for each other's right to freedom of conscience

b. The difference between acceptance and tolerance

c. The limits of freedom of conscience

d. How to use the cardinal virtues as ground rules for civil dialogue