

Intellectual Humility: What It Is and Why Schools Need It

The importance of admitting what you don't know

By Tenelle Porter, Jon Valant & Robin Bayes — August 26, 2024 ⌚ 5 min read



— Eva Vázquez for Education Week

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Since the nation's earliest days, Americans have seen a role for schools in securing a stable democracy and cohesive society. However, for almost as long as we've agreed that schools should serve democratic and social purposes, we've disagreed about how they should do it.

Today, blue and red America have starkly different ideas about a lot of things. Over the past two decades, Gallup has found that the gaps between Democrats' and Republicans' views have widened or stayed the same on all 24 political and social issues it has tracked. Meanwhile, the Pew Research Center has found that the pandemic accelerated a partisan divide in Americans' confidence in institutions of knowledge, like science and medicine.

It is no surprise that these disagreements extend to public schools.

Unfortunately, having seemingly irreconcilable views of how schools should prepare citizens doesn't absolve us of the need to instill core values across the population. It just makes it difficult.

We need to find virtues that the political right and left both see as valuable and we need those virtues to have a meaningful connection to our political and societal well-being. When the time comes for schools to instill those virtues, we need instructional approaches that guard against the temptation to tinge this work in partisan red or blue.

Intellectual humility is one place to look.

What is intellectual humility?

Intellectual humility is an idea that stretches back to texts as ancient as the biblical Proverbs. It means being willing to see that our knowledge is partial and other people know things that we do not. It means admitting when we do not know something or when we are mistaken. It means trying to learn something from other people, including those who see the world differently from us.

Research suggests intellectual humility is more likely to be found among those who have a secure sense of self. (Arrogance, on the other hand, often covers up deep-seated insecurity.)

Being more intellectually humble does not mean that you're conflict-avoidant. On the contrary, people who are more intellectually humble tend to be more interested in politics and enjoy political discussions more, perhaps because approaching these discussions with intellectual humility makes them more interesting and productive.

And intellectual humility certainly does not require abandoning all knowledge, capitulating, or always changing one's views. Rather, as Benjamin Franklin put it, it requires doubting a little in our own infallibility and changing our views when the evidence leads us to do so.

Why intellectual humility now?

Think back on the decadeslong debate over teaching evolution.

This fight was in a particularly ugly era when one of us (Tenelle Porter) was attending high school. On one side, some members of faith communities denounced evolution as pseudoscience. Popular Christian books attacked evolutionary theories, depicting them as false and hostile to religion.

On the other side, some atheists and members of scientific communities branded religious people as fundamentally anti-science, likening their faith in God to belief in a “[flying spaghetti monster](#).” Popular science-religion books from the time depicted believers as stupid, delusional, and hateful.

For students in that Bible Belt high school, the message was loud and clear: Pick a team and defend it vigorously. Forget trying to understand different perspectives on ancient mysteries and forget grappling with profound questions about humanity and a fascinating, incomplete, and complex evidence base. There was a battle to be won.

Those heated debates—full of zeal, rigidity, and overconfident ignorance—were a testament to the need for real guidance on how to move beyond simple-minded dogma. In other words, we could have used some training on intellectual humility.

Today’s young learners have the same need, one that has grown even more high stakes as social media has further fractured our information environments. We all need intellectual humility to lay down our arms, correct misbeliefs, and try to understand those who have different perspectives.

Research supports the idea that intellectual humility can help. With more intellectual humility, people tend to be less dogmatic, more curious, and more [willing to learn about the opposing view](#). Intellectual humility helps [protect people from believing and sharing misinformation](#) and [from endorsing conspiracy theories](#).

Regardless of their political views, intellectually humble people [give more weight to evidence-based public-health recommendations](#) and are [more likely to follow those recommendations](#).

Is intellectual humility teachable in schools?

Educating for intellectual humility is critical to the mission of schools: to instill a desire for truth, understanding, and learning throughout our lives.

Are intellectually humble people born or made? What makes us want to be intellectually humble? Is that desire fixed or can it be shaped? [A recent study](#) of middle school students and their teachers that one of us (Tenelle Porter, again) co-authored with several collaborators may offer some initial answers.

The study included survey responses from more than 500 6th and 7th graders over the course of a year and more than 100 in-person classroom observations. At three different times in one year, students rated, for example, how willing they were to admit it when they didn’t know something.

The research found that some teachers created a classroom culture that prioritized learning and growth (trying to understand) over performing (trying to look smart). These teachers were more likely to have students who grew in intellectual humility at the end of the year and into the next.

Further research has suggested that when teachers model intellectual humility first, students become more willing to follow suit.

The bottom line is that when intellectual humility is valued, modeled, and practiced in a classroom, students *can* grow in intellectual humility. They also learn more as a result.

How can we teach intellectual humility about polarized issues?

As educators, we will encounter students we disagree with—and who disagree with each other. How should we approach these moments when the disagreements are over emotionally charged issues?

In our view, students need intellectually humble teachers, coaches, counselors, and religious leaders to show them how to seek out competing ideas and graciously admit, to themselves or others, that their underlying assumptions might be wrong.

They need to hear stories of how even the teachers they admire sometimes get things wrong or change their minds.

They need to see how to talk with those with different views and how to do the difficult work of constructing a position after fairly considering different sides of the issue—and then being prepared to revise that position later.

Realistically, we won't find ourselves in a place anytime soon where Americans of different political persuasions have fundamentally similar views of the world. And that's OK.

What we do need, though, is to figure out how to live together peacefully despite our different perspectives. That's something that schools can help with.

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