



Role Multiplicity in Practice: Practicing Courageous Citizenship in Contested Civic Spaces

April Chatham-Carpenter*
University of Arkansas at Little Rock

This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

The ideas in each paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Beyond Intractability, Braver Angels, or the Citizen Scholars Council. The copyright and responsibility for the content of each article is retained by the authors.

This PDF version of the article is intended for printing and reading on desktop computers. An [HTML version](#), suitable for reading on smartphones, is also available.

All authors’ bios are found on the [Civic Scholars Council Biography Page](#).

Abstract

This essay frames courageous citizenship as a set of communication choices for navigating multiple roles in contested civic spaces. Drawing on experiences in higher education and civic facilitation, it examines four practices, including conversational receptiveness and intentional learning design, which build conflict resiliency, sustain engagement across difference, and strengthen democratic life.

In recent years, I have found myself making communication choices across different parts of my professional life as I navigate multiple roles in contested civic spaces. In the classroom, I decide how to present examples in ways that reflect a variety of perspectives. After class, students ask where I stand politically, but I choose not to disclose in order to avoid shaping how they engage with one another and with me. As a department chair, I decide whether my department should sponsor a public-facing podcast I co-host through Braver Angels. In facilitated community dialogue sessions, I consider whether to share my own perspective when participants hesitate to speak. In each of these settings, what happens next matters. The decision of how to stay engaged or to withdraw shapes whether any shared sense of understanding remains possible.

These moments reveal a gap between how citizenship is often imagined and what democratic life requires. This gap reflects a broader tension in democratic practice between outcomes and process, where the quality of interaction often determines whether collective work can continue ([Carcasson, 2018](#)). Public discourse frequently frames civic participation in terms of persuasion, advocacy, or winning arguments. Citizens are encouraged to refine their positions, marshal evidence, and convince others. Yet many of the most consequential civic interactions do not hinge on who makes the strongest argument. They hinge on whether participants can remain in relationship long enough to continue the work of communication, and that depends in part on the choices made in everyday interactions.

In this paper, I argue that courageous citizenship is best understood not as a matter of individual virtue or persuasive ability, but as a set of communication choices that enable people to remain engaged, contribute to shared civic life, and participate in democratic problem-solving across difference. These choices involve listening under pressure, engaging disagreement without dehumanization, and navigating uncertainty in ways that sustain interaction. Taken together, these capacities contribute to what can be understood as conflict resiliency, the ability to remain engaged, responsive, and constructive in the face of ongoing disagreement ([Bordone, 2018](#)). Crucially, these practices do not emerge accidentally. They are intentionally constructed and can be cultivated through experience and design, consistent with a Human and Civic Development framework of citizenship.

Drawing on my work as a communication scholar and educator, as well as a volunteer leader and facilitator with Braver Angels, I examine how these communication choices are enacted in both classroom and civic settings. I also consider the challenges of cultivating them within a Red State context where higher education and civic engagement are often subject to heightened scrutiny. Across these settings, I argue that the ability to navigate role multiplicity, manage constraint, and engage without inflaming conflict constitutes a central form of civic courage in contemporary democratic life. To support my argument, I focus on four practices for navigating

the tensions of role multiplicity in contested civic spaces, particularly within higher education and civic contexts: (a) navigating multiple roles as a citizen and professional, (b) reframing persuasion through conversational receptiveness, (c) designing intentional learning environments, and (d) negotiating tensions within one's political context.

Navigate the Complexity of Multiple Roles: Courage Under Constraint

The first practice involves recognizing that we enter contested civic spaces with multiple roles, each shaping the communication choices available to us in that moment. In my own work, I move between roles as a college professor, higher education administrator, civic facilitator, and participant in public-facing conversations. Each role carries different expectations and risks, shaping what I can say, how I can say it, and how it is likely to be interpreted.

Courageous citizenship, in this context, is not simply about speaking one's mind. It is about navigating these roles with care. It involves decisions about when to disclose personal perspectives and when to hold them back, how to frame conversations so they remain open rather than adversarial, and how to maintain trust with audiences who may view the same issue or interaction very differently.

For example, as a co-host of *On the Other Hand*, a public affairs podcast connected to Braver Angels in my state, I regularly engage guests whose perspectives span the political spectrum. I do not openly identify myself to guests in ideological terms, nor does my co-host, who brings a different perspective. We intentionally structure the conversation in ways that prioritize engagement over signaling position. This requires ongoing choices about how to enter the conversation, what questions to ask, and how to respond in ways that invite reflection rather than defensiveness. I consider where my own reactions might show up in ways that shift the tone of the exchange. In addition, I wonder how I will be perceived as a professor, if my administrators, colleagues, or students listen to this podcast.

There are moments during these conversations when I feel the pull to respond more directly, to signal agreement or disagreement, or to clarify where I stand. Sometimes I do. But most often, I choose not to. That decision is not about withholding perspective. It is about maintaining the conditions for the conversation to continue. If I move too quickly into evaluation or counterargument, the exchange can narrow. If I stay with curiosity a bit longer, the conversation often opens in ways that would not have been possible otherwise ([Guzmán, 2022](#)). This emphasis on managing how disagreement is expressed reflects a broader shift toward teaching people how to disagree more constructively in everyday interactions ([Minson, 2026](#)). At the same time, I recognize that choosing not to step in may shape how I am perceived in ways that do not fully align with how I see myself.

These moments also highlight the often invisible nature of communicative labor in civic life. The decisions I make as a facilitator of a Braver Angels workshop or in a civil dialogue meeting, for example, choosing to hold back, to ask a question instead of making a statement, or to remain curious rather than evaluative, require ongoing attention and intentionality ([Oliver-Blackburn & Chatham-Carpenter, 2023](#)). It is not the absence of engagement, but a different form of engagement that prioritizes the sustainability of the interaction over the immediate expression of perspective. Recognizing this labor as a form of civic contribution reframes how we

understand participation. It shifts the attention away from visibility and assertion and toward the less visible work of maintaining the conditions under which dialogue can continue and recognizing that often the issues we are talking about are more complex than can be managed in one conversation.

A similar dynamic plays out in the classroom. Students occasionally ask where I stand on a particular issue. My response is intentional and shaped by the role I occupy in that moment. I might acknowledge that I have a perspective while redirecting the focus back to the conversation unfolding among them. The goal is not to position myself as neutral, but to ensure that my role does not inadvertently close down the space they need to engage one another.

These are small decisions in the moment, but they accumulate. They shape whether people feel able to stay in the room, whether disagreement becomes productive or polarizing, and whether communication continues or collapses. These moments illustrate that courageous citizenship is not only expressed through communication, but constructed through deliberate choices about timing, disclosure, and conversational framing. The ability to manage these choices across roles is not incidental to civic life. It is central to sustaining it.

Reframe Persuasion Invitationally Through Conversational Receptiveness

Understanding these role-based constraints helps explain why traditional models of persuasion often fall short in contested civic spaces. The second practice I highlight is the need to reframe persuasion relationally, not by abandoning it, but by making more intentional communication choices about how and when it is used. While persuasion has a legitimate place in democratic discourse, an exclusive focus on influence narrows our understanding of civic participation ([Foss & Griffin, 2020](#); [Keith & Danisch, 2020](#)). Students, citizens, and leaders are often trained to articulate positions clearly, defend them effectively, and influence others. However, when every interaction is treated as an opportunity to win, disagreement becomes a zero-sum game, and the relational conditions necessary for ongoing engagement begin to suffer as a result ([Ury, 2024](#)).

From the perspective advanced in this paper, the issue is not persuasion itself, but the unexamined assumption that persuasion should be the default goal of civic interaction. Persuasion-oriented models typically assume that success is measured by change, whether that involves shifting minds, securing agreement, or advancing one's position. When individuals enter conversations with this expectation, they are more likely to interpret disagreement as failure and to disengage when change does not occur.

By contrast, courageous citizenship, informed by an invitational approach to persuasion, requires a different set of communication choices and involves deciding when to advocate and when to inquire, when to assert a position and when to remain curious, and when to prioritize being understood over being persuasive ([Foss & Griffin, 2020](#)). These choices become especially important in polarized environments, where positions are often tied to identity, community, and deeply held values. In such contexts, attempts at persuasion can feel less like invitations to dialogue and more like challenges to one's sense of self, leading to defensiveness, withdrawal, or escalation ([Minson & Dorison, 2022](#)).

Reframing persuasion relationally shifts the focus from influence to engagement. One way this shift is enacted is through the practice of conversational receptiveness, which highlights how specific communication choices shape whether conversations continue or break down ([Minson & Chen, 2022](#)). Foundational research on conversational receptiveness demonstrates that even subtle linguistic choices can significantly increase openness to opposing views ([Yeomans et al., 2020](#)). Research on conversational receptiveness demonstrates that acknowledging others' perspectives, using language that signals openness, and responding without immediate defensiveness increase the likelihood of sustained engagement ([Oliver-Blackburn et al., 2025](#)).

In practice, conversational receptiveness is not a matter of tone alone, but of disciplined choice. It is not simply civility, which is often understood as politeness or surface-level respect ([Keith & Danisch, 2020](#)). Nor is it neutrality, or an attempt to eliminate disagreement. Rather, it is a commitment to remaining in the communicative process in ways that preserve the possibility of continued engagement, even when disagreement persists.

This shift is enacted through communication choices such as pausing a discussion to clarify understanding, asking participants to reflect back what they heard before offering their own response, and asking questions that invite reflection rather than rebuttal ([Minson, 2026](#); [Teschner et al., 2025](#)). It also involves deliberately choosing not to correct or counter immediately, even when the pull to do so is strong. These are small decisions in the moment. They are decisions I regularly face as both an instructor and facilitator. They shape whether interaction remains open or collapses.

In this sense, conversational receptiveness requires a form of discipline. It involves noticing one's own impulses to correct, defend, or persuade, and choosing instead to engage in ways that keep the interaction open. This does not eliminate conflict, but it transforms how conflict is experienced and navigated ([Minson, 2026](#)). By contrast, when traditional views of persuasion remain the dominant frame, individuals are more likely to feel evaluated or challenged, leading to defensiveness or disengagement ([Minson & Dorison, 2022](#)). The very skills often emphasized in civic education, such as argumentation, rebuttal, and strategic messaging, can, in these moments, contribute to the breakdown of the conversations they are meant to support. This emphasis on outcomes over process reflects a broader tendency in democratic life to prioritize winning over the quality of interaction, even though the latter often determines whether engagement can be sustained ([Carcasson, 2018](#)).

Design Intentional Learning Environments While Teaching Courageous Citizenship

If courageous citizenship is enacted through practices grounded in communication, including the relational reframing of persuasion described above, then the contexts in which it is taught must be intentionally designed, so that specific communication choices are visible, expected, and assessable. In my teaching, this begins with the language of syllabi and assignments. Rather than framing activities in terms of persuasion, argumentation, or debate, I explicitly frame them around communication goals such as understanding, engagement, and accountability to others. For example, students may be asked not to convince others of their position, but to demonstrate

their ability to represent another perspective accurately, to ask questions that deepen the conversation, or to remain engaged when disagreement persists.

In my Listening and Civil Dialogue class, for example, I give students an assignment that often unsettles them at first. Instead of asking them to argue for their own position, I ask them to engage in two one-hour one-to-one conversations with someone who is different from them, to demonstrate that they can represent someone else's perspective in a way that that person would recognize as fair. The instructions are explicit. Students are required to follow a structured guide that asks them to make specific communication choices throughout the interaction. They listen for understanding, share their own perspectives and stories, and identify areas of shared values or common ground as the conversation unfolds. They are being evaluated on whether they can stay engaged, ask questions that deepen understanding, and respond in ways that keep the conversation going.

The first time I introduce this assignment, students often push back. They ask, "So we're not supposed to argue?" or "What if we disagree?" What they are really asking is how to participate if the goal is not to win. In those early conversations, many default to familiar patterns, such as waiting for their turn to speak, listening just enough to respond, or reintroducing their own position prematurely.

Over time, something begins to shift. Students pause longer before responding. They begin to notice when a conversation is closing down and experiment with ways to reopen it. These shifts reflect changes in the communication choices students are making in real time. One student reflected that this was the first time they had stayed in a conversation where they strongly disagreed without trying to change the other person's mind. "It felt strange," they said, "but also like something important was happening." Another student noted that they could share their own perspective without the conversation shutting down. These shifts demonstrate how such practices are not merely taught conceptually, but produced through the intentional design of expectations, evaluation criteria, and interactional norms. When the goal changes, the communication choices students make begin to change as well. These shifts also reflect the development of conflict resiliency, as students start building the capacity to remain engaged in disagreement without defaulting to withdrawal or escalation ([Bordone, 2018](#)).

What is notable in such shifts is not simply that students behave differently, but that they begin to understand communication as something they are actively shaping ([Ury, 2024](#); [Weintraub, 2025](#)). Rather than seeing conversations as exchanges that happen to them, they begin to recognize how their choices of when to speak, how to respond, and what questions to ask affect the direction and quality of the interaction. This awareness marks an important transition. It reflects movement from "participation as expression" to "participation as responsibility." Students begin to see that staying engaged in a difficult conversation is not a passive act, but an active contribution to the shared space they are co-creating ([Mirivel & Lyons, 2023](#)).

This dynamic extends across other classroom activities as well. In group and team settings, students are often asked to navigate disagreement in the context of shared tasks. These situations introduce additional complexity, as students must balance their own perspectives with the needs of the group. Here, communication practices, such as listening, reframing, and

sustained engagement, become essential to completing the work. Students often find these situations frustrating at first. Without a clear “winning” outcome, they must learn to sit with uncertainty and continue participating even when resolution is not immediate. Over time, however, many begin to recognize that this is precisely what civic life requires.

The practice of intentional design does more than develop individual skills. It shapes the communication choices students see as possible and appropriate in civic life. In this way, civic capacity is engineered through communication design, consistent with a Human and Civic Development framework, where the goal is not simply participation, but the cultivation of citizens capable of self-awareness, emotional steadiness, and engagement across difference ([Carcasson, 2018](#)). By learning to engage across difference, remain accountable to others, and sustain participation in group processes, students experience citizenship as co-creation rather than simply expression ([Mirivel & Lyons, 2023](#); [Teschner et al., 2025](#)). The classroom becomes a space where the foundations of democratic life are not only discussed, but enacted.

Negotiate Necessary Tensions in One’s Own Political Environment

A final practice involves making intentional communication choices while navigating the constraints of one’s political and institutional environment. In a Red State context where higher education is often under scrutiny and civic reflection can be misinterpreted as ideological or partisan, communication choices shape how this work is understood and received. This context represents the conditions under which all of the preceding practices have been tested.

I am acutely aware that my teaching takes place in a context where classroom interactions may be recorded, circulated, and interpreted beyond their original setting. This awareness shapes how I frame discussions, respond to student contributions, and position my role within the conversation in real time.

This dynamic is not always predictable. While I identify as politically conservative and work within a predominantly conservative regional context, this alignment does not eliminate the pressures associated with this work. There are moments when I may still be perceived as misaligned or insufficiently aligned with a particular political ideology, regardless of my intent. This adds another layer of consideration to how I communicate across both civic and educational spaces.

In my teaching, this reality shapes how I describe assignments, how I explain their purpose, and how I respond to questions about what we are doing in class. I am intentional in framing this work in terms of communication skills, democratic participation, and shared civic responsibilities. This is not an attempt to avoid difficult topics or to present the work as apolitical. Rather, it is a recognition that the ability to engage across difference is foundational to any functioning democracy and must be understood as such.

Navigating this landscape requires ongoing negotiation. There are moments when students seek clarity about my own views, or when discussions move into areas that could easily be interpreted as advocacy. In these moments, I must make decisions about how to respond to preserve both the integrity of the learning environment and the legitimacy of the work. These decisions are

rarely automatic. They involve weighing the value of disclosure against the risk of narrowing the conversation, while balancing openness with responsibility to the broader context.

These dynamics extend beyond the classroom into public-facing civic work, where similar considerations shape how dialogue is facilitated and how engagement is framed, as well as whose voices are privileged. The need to maintain trust across differences, to avoid escalation, and to remain accountable to multiple audiences reinforces the importance of practices grounded in communication that prioritize clarity, restraint, and responsiveness.

At times, these constraints are communicated explicitly. In one instance, an institutional leader advised me that public-facing work engaging political difference would likely be interpreted as reflective of the university itself, regardless of intent. As a result, I was encouraged to consider how such work was formally affiliated and represented. This guidance shaped a decision I ultimately made regarding a public dialogue initiative connected to my work. Rather than situating the project within a formal university departmental structure, I chose to position it more independently. This was not a retreat from the work, but a strategic adjustment designed to preserve both the integrity of the project and the institutional context in which I operate.

At the same time, the institutional environment is not uniformly constraining. The same context that introduces these considerations has also provided meaningful support for this work. I was recently recognized with a university award for public service connected to my civic engagement efforts with Braver Angels. I have also been invited to lead workshops on campus and encouraged to count this work as part of my service contributions as a faculty member. These forms of recognition signal institutional support, even as the work must be carefully positioned through communication choices that keep conversations open, emphasizing engagement over persuasion and framing the work in terms of shared civic responsibility.

The coexistence of support and constraint reflects a more nuanced institutional reality than is often assumed. Civic engagement work is not simply enabled or restricted; it is interpreted, negotiated, and positioned within overlapping expectations. The same work that is affirmed in one context may be questioned in another, depending on how it is framed and understood. In this sense, teaching and civic work function not only as educational acts, but as sites of communication where meaning, legitimacy, and trust are continuously negotiated ([Keith & Danisch, 2020](#)).

This context reveals that courageous citizenship involves engaging across difference through disciplined communication choices that sustain legitimacy and trust within contested environments. In this sense, courage is not only expressed through what is said, but through the choices that make

continued engagement possible.

Conclusion: Constructing the Conditions for Civic Life

The closing pledge of the Declaration of Independence, “our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor,” invites reflection on what citizens are willing to risk in order to remain engaged in the work of democratic life. While the historical context of this pledge differs from contemporary

civic life, the underlying question remains relevant: What does it mean to commit oneself to the ongoing work of democratic participation through communication choices made across multiple roles?

In today's context, the risks associated with civic engagement are many. They include relational risk, as individuals engage with others whose perspectives challenge their own; reputational risk, as communication is subject to interpretation and potential mischaracterization; and institutional risk, particularly for those working within environments where civic engagement may be scrutinized or contested. Courageous citizenship, understood as a set of communication choices, involves a willingness to engage these risks and to develop the conflict resiliency required to remain in the work of democratic engagement. It is expressed not only in moments of public action, but in the ongoing work of remaining in conversation, navigating difference, and contributing to shared civic spaces.

In this paper, I have argued that capacities for engaging these risks across multiple roles can be intentionally cultivated through practices that shape how people engage across difference, each grounded in the communication choices individuals make in real time. Taken together, whether navigating multiple roles under constraint, reframing persuasion through conversational receptiveness, designing intentional learning environments, or negotiating tensions within one's political context, courageous citizenship is constructed through the choices individuals make in how they communicate.

In this sense, democratic life is sustained not only through institutions and policies, but through the everyday communication choices that determine whether interaction remains possible. At a time when polarization threatens those conditions, the question is not only what citizens believe, but how they choose to engage one another across the multiple roles they inhabit. These practices do not simply shape how citizens communicate. They shape who citizens become as they engage democratic life. The future of democratic life depends, in part, on the willingness to make those choices in ways that keep the conversation going.

References

Bordone, R. C. (2018). Building conflict resilience: It's not just about problem-solving. *Journal of Dispute Resolution*, 2018(1), 65-73.

Carcasson, M. (2018). Why process matters: Democracy and human nature. *National Civic Review*, 107(1), pp. 36-39.

Foss, S. K., & Griffin, C. L. (Eds.). (2020). *Inviting understanding: A portrait of invitational rhetoric*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Guzman, M. (2022). *I never thought of it that way: How to have fearlessly curious conversations in dangerously divide times*. BenBella Books.

Keith, W., & Danisch, R. (2020). *Beyond civility: The competing obligations of citizenship*. Penn State University Press.

Minson, J. (2026). *How to disagree better*. Avery.

Minson J. A., & Chen F. S. (2022). Receptiveness to opposing views: Conceptualization and integrative review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 26(2), 93–111.

Minson, J. A., & Dorison, C. (2022). Why is exposure to opposing views aversive? Reconciling three theoretical perspectives. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 101435.

Mirivel, J. C., & Lyons, A. (2023). *Positive communication for leaders: Proven strategies for inspiring unity and effecting change*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Oliver-Blackburn, B. M., & Chatham-Carpenter, A. (2023). ‘But I don’t know if I want to talk to you’: Strategies to foster conversational receptiveness across the United States’ political divide. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 51(1), 55-71.

Oliver-Blackburn, B. M., Chatham-Carpenter, A., & Thompson, C. L. (2025). Civic community listening: The Nexus of storytelling and listening within civic communities. *Community listening: Stories, hauntings, possibilities*, 143-174.

Teschner, D., Malow, B., & Robinson, B. (2025). *Beyond the politics of contempt: Practical steps to build positive relationships in divide times*. Together Across Differences LLC.

Ury, W. (2024). *Possible: How we survive (and thrive) in an age of conflict*. Harper Business.

Weintraub, L. (2025). *Polarization and civil discourse in America: A case study of respectful dialogue as a moderating influence on Generation Z*. [Doctoral dissertation, Pepperdine University.] Proquest Dissertation & Theses.

Yeomans, M., Minson, J., Collins, H., Chen, F., & Gino, F. (2020). Conversational receptiveness: Improving engagement with opposing views. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 160, 131-148

* April Chatham-Carpenter, Ph.D., is Professor and Chair of Applied Communication at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and a scholar of listening, conflict, and communication across difference. She serves as Arkansas State Coordinator for Braver Angels and co-hosts both *On the Other Hand*, a podcast focused on bridging political divides, and *A Braver Arkansas*, an Arkansas TV PBS-affiliated television program exploring how people can talk across differences and work together on issues facing their communities.