

How HxA Members Are Teaching Constructive Disagreement with Sway

An AI helps students practice dialogue across difference to broaden inquiry

Instructors across over 80 universities are using the HxA-supported AI-guided app Sway to give thousands of students structured practice in constructive disagreement on contentious issues. Data from student conversations show significant shifts in openness and understanding after using the tool, demonstrating how Sway can strengthen open inquiry and viewpoint diversity in classrooms of any size — and on any topic.

CASE AT A GLANCE

- Sway is an AI-supported chat platform developed by philosophers and HxA Researchers Simon Cullen and Nicholas DiBella that pairs students who disagree on a chosen topic and then guides them through respectful, inquiry-based, one-on-one conversations.
- Thousands of students at 80+ universities have used Sway to discuss topics such as gender identity, immigration, racism, euthanasia, organ donation, and gun laws.
- In surveys from dozens of universities, about half of all students report changing their mind about something after a Sway chat.

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I have a dream that Sway will be widely adopted across universities across the country, and maybe around the world. That we'll have professors assigning Sway experiences to students in a variety of courses and a variety of disciplines. And we'll see constructive disagreement and a change in the culture of open inquiry because of the work that [Sway has] been doing.

— John Tomasi, President of HxA



SIMON CULLEN



NICK DIBELLA

THE CHALLENGE:

According to HxA's [Campus Expression Survey](#), 89% of students report feeling reluctant to discuss any one of a number of important but controversial topics in class because they fear conflict, judgment, or harm to their grades. In large classes, only a handful of outspoken students typically speak up, while the majority stay silent — especially those with unpopular views. Instructors who want to foster genuine dialogue across difference often lack tools to ensure every student can participate meaningfully.

Sway was created to solve a practical version of that problem: How can we provide students with transformative, one-on-one discussions about controversial topics at scale — without requiring instructors to devote hours to facilitating such conversations or having an army of highly trained TAs in every class? And how can we support the development of students' topic neutral reasoning skills at scale?

THE CHANGE

Simon Cullen and Nicholas DiBella developed the concept for Sway after seeing the effectiveness of Cullen's "Dangerous Ideas" lecture and discussion course at Carnegie Mellon. Sway connects students who hold meaningfully different views on instructor-chosen topics — which can be anything at all — after completing a brief survey. Once paired, they enter a private, one-on-one text chat where:

- An AI facilitator called "Guide" prompts both students to explain their reasoning, supply evidence, notice assumptions, listen charitably, and stay on track.
- The system can provide rephrased suggestions for unconstructive comments, turning them into more respectful language that still captures the meaning of the original.
- Slurs, personal attacks, and insults are blocked, preserving the conditions for productive dialogue.
- When students disagree about facts, they can ask Guide, which draws on authoritative scholarly sources while maintaining intellectual humility about contested issues.

Students consistently describe conversations on Sway as respectful, thoughtful, and deeply unlike typical online or in-class conflict. [Many say](#) they had never spoken with someone who disagreed so strongly — or so constructively — before.

Sway has been used at [dozens of schools](#) — including Harvard University, Columbia University, and Stanford University — to facilitate discussion on racism, tariffs, immigration, abortion, guns, homelessness, and more.

HxA has helped to connect our members with Sway, enabling them to use it in their classrooms. At UCLA, HxA member, sociologist, and Open Inquiry Award winner for Teaching Excellence [Abigail Saguy used Sway](#) in her large undergraduate Sociology of Gender course — the first full-course pilot test for the platform. Saguy used Sway to run six structured chats over a semester, combining it with in-person interviews and reflection exercises to reinforce listening skills and empathy.

Saguy's students initially felt nervous about disagreeing, but many reported that the Sway environment — especially Guide's presence — made it feel safer to engage. Her students told her they got better at disagreeing constructively over time, and that this practice was unlike anything they had previously experienced in their coursework.

THE IMPACT:

- Students overwhelmingly report finding the experience valuable, reporting that their partners are respectful, they are not offended by opposing views, and it is valuable to talk with someone who disagrees.
- About 45% of students report changing their minds about something related to the topic, and on average their opinions move around 1.5 points closer together on a 7-point agree/disagree scale.
- For over 80% of students, talking through their disagreements in a scaffolded chat improved their perceptions of their classmates.
- Sway continues to expand its impact: Over 400 instructors, collectively teaching more than 30,000 students at 100+ North American institutions and 25 international schools have signed up to use Sway.

ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

1

Make constructive disagreement an explicit learning objective in your syllabus. Use Sway to ensure *every* student participates in a productive discussion.

2

Pair Sway with in-person activities to further develop the skills of constructive disagreement.

3

Use Sway's built-in data tools to track impact in your course, more deeply understand student reasoning, and share results with colleagues and administrators to build institutional support.

4

Share your Sway experience with other faculty, adapt best practices, and support rollout across courses and departments.



Learn how Sway can help foster constructive disagreement in your classroom: www.swaybeta.ai