



Sample Guidelines for Classroom Discussion Agreements

By no means exhaustive, the following is a list of potential guidelines for classroom discussion, which may be particularly useful when approaching difficult or challenging topics. If such topics are already built into the syllabus, you may wish to present your own version (or a selection) of similar guidelines at the start of the term and solicit student input, posting the list to Canvas or distributing via an updated syllabus. As the semester continues and you witness particularly constructive or problematic behaviors, you may wish to revisit and revise this list with your students.

Basic Guidelines:

Listen attentively. Pay attention to what someone is saying – without being distracted by your technology, side conversation, or pre-planning your response. Beginning to dismantle their point of view before they are finished not only limits your capacity to understand and learn, but may leave gaps in your own arguments.

No interrupting. Speaking over someone or having a side conversation inhibits your ability to listen effectively and is disrespectful to the person sharing their ideas.

No name calling. This applies to people foremost. Be respectful of people, and focus on challenging ideas.

Give and take air time. Be aware of how much you are talking as compared with other voices in the room. Who else may be waiting to share their perspective? Concurrently, if you have an idea that has not yet been shared, be sure to take the appropriate air time due to your voice.

Confidentiality. Some people may raise controversial points of view, share deeply personal information, or leave you feeling particularly emotional after class. You should not use what is discussed in this classroom in outside conversations.

Sharing Your Thoughts:

It is okay to make mistakes. Mistakes are how we learn. Invite yourself and others to learn from mistakes by talking about their impact and how to avoid similar mistakes in the future.

Demonstrate your reasoning. How are you building connections between pieces of evidence and theory to justify your argument?

Connect the discussion to prior course material and discussions. What are the connections that might be emerging?

Acknowledge and value that each person brings different experiences, knowledge, and levels of awareness to the discussion. How can you build off of and further contribute to what other students and the faculty have shared?

Emotions are okay and to be expected. Name your reaction and what you think is prompting it. Someone could learn about the impact of a particular idea or piece of knowledge.

You do not need to be the sole representative of any of the identities you hold. There is significant emotional labor involved with talking about your community's culture, and even then, you cannot speak for everyone. Do this when it is healthy for you.

Guidelines for Responding to Statements:

Use "I" statements to own your experiences and thoughts. You cannot speak for everyone – only yourself. "I think..." "I feel..." and "I believe..." are more effective than "We think..." "They feel..." or "You believe..."

It is okay to name an idea or statement as oppressive, problematic, or triggering as long as you also name why you believe it to be so. Discuss the concerns you have about an idea, the logic/evidence/justification used, and why you think the idea is subsequently problematic, but referring to an idea as "stupid" or "ridiculous" errs toward judgmental name calling. Critique the idea using evidence and theory you think are relevant.

Seek to understand when you think something problematic or unclear was shared. Ask a question that prompts the other person to clarify what they meant.

Trust intent and name impact. Believe that your classmates are actively trying to learn, and that sometimes an idea comes out poorly phrased. Ask them to clarify what was said and share what you heard and/or felt.

Listening and Reflecting:

Question your assumptions about people in the class and the ideas being presented. In what ways can other points of view help inform your own stance?

Acknowledge and appreciate the effort of those that are sharing their perspectives. It takes a certain amount of bravery to share one's perspective – especially if it is uncommon. Concurrently, do not feel as though you are entitled to someone else's knowledge or experience: you can ask for someone to share, but they may not feel comfortable doing so; respect their choice.

Acknowledge how some narratives are erased or represented from the evidence base, and we may need to accept other forms of knowledge. Raise questions about where the evidence used in class originated from and the perspectives or evidence that they may have missed. Whose voices/images are missing?

Trust the process. These conversations can be long and complex. Know that you might not find a solution to the issue on the table, or that you might not cover every facet of the topic in one class session. Learning may continue into another class or even on your own.

Adapted from:

Adams, M., Bell, L. A., & Griffin, P. (2007). *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Arao, B. & Clemens, K. (2013). From safe spaces to brace spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In L. M. Landreman (ed.) *The art of effective facilitation: Reflections from social justice educators*, (pp. 135-150). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. (n.d.). Examples of discussion guidelines [Web log resource]. Retrieved from <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/examples-discussion-guidelines>

Cote-Meek, S. (2014). *Colonized classrooms: Racism, trauma, and resistance in post-secondary education*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood.

Fox, H. (2017). *"When race breaks out:" Conversations about race and racism in college classrooms* (3rd ed.). New York: Peter Lang.

Leonardo, Z., & Porter, R. K. (2010). Pedagogy of fear: Toward a Fanonian theory of 'safety' in race dialogue. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 13(2), 139-157.