Discussion Guide

During this class, students will spend a significant portion of their time engaging in discussions with other students. The purpose of this document is to provide guidelines, structure, and resources designed to keep these discussions productive, engaging, and inclusive to all.

Students are not responsible for reading this document prior to class – its key points will be presented during the first week of class.

Contents

A. Community Guidelines

Community guidelines (definition): community guidelines describe features of inclusive discussions. In this class, they serve as a set of standards to which we can hold ourselves and each other accountable.

Motivation: Following these guidelines can enable productive, engaging, and inclusive dialogues. Given the sensitivity of the topics covered in this course, the guidelines listed below are especially important to uphold. *In this class, all students share the responsibility of upholding these community guidelines.*

15-996 Community Guidelines[1]

1. **Engage with and amplify others' perspectives.** For example…
   "I liked the point X made a while ago about _____",
   "Can you clarify what you mean when you say _____?"

2. **Actively share the space.**
   "What do you think, X?"
   "I'm noticing that a few of us are talking a lot, how about we step back and let others share?"
   "My perspective is _____, but does anyone see it differently?"

3. **Support others when they state their boundaries or advocate for themselves.**
   "Thank you for communicating what works best for you."
   "Is there anything else that we can do to support you?"

4. **Advocate for ourselves (this one can be hard, and takes practice!).**
   "I feel/felt _____ when _____."
   "Can we pause the conversation? I need a break or topic switch."
   "I am not comfortable talking about _____."
   "I would like to leave the conversation for today."

5. **Respect and validate others' feelings and experiences, even if they are unfamiliar.**
   "Thank you for sharing."
   "That sounds really hard."

6. **Address the *impact* of our words, not just our *intent***
   "I can see that what I said hurt you, and I'm sorry."

7. **Be mindful of triggers[2]**
   "I am about to bring up the topic of ___. Is everyone okay with discussing that?"

8. **Keep things shared by other students confidential by default.**

   Students may share their thoughts and personal experiences during class. Do not repeat this information to anyone else, except if you or someone else is at risk of being harmed – in such a case, contact an instructor.

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[1] If you disagree with or want clarification, please comment in this document or give feedback via the channels listed on the syllabus.

[2] **Triggers** are events that remind someone of past trauma. Experiencing a trigger can cause someone extreme emotional overwhelm or distress [paraphrased from Healthline]. For more information, see this Eberly Center handout on triggers.

B. Techniques for inclusively discussing difficult topics

1. **Use "I" statements.** "I" statements are statements in which one speaks only to their own experiences, emotions, and interpretations of events, rather than speaking about others' assumed experiences, emotions, intentions, or interpretations. *Note:* an "I" statement does *not* discuss others' actions or intentions (e.g., "*I feel that X person did Y / intended to do Y*" is <u>not</u> an "I" statement).

2. **Avoid singling anyone out, when possible.** For example, if you feel someone is pushing the discussion in an off-task direction, you could say "I'm noticing that the discussion is becoming a bit off-task, can we revisit the question we're discussing?" instead of directly asking that specific person to stay on-task.

3. **Avoid assuming knowledge.** For example, avoid phrasing like "it's obvious that".

4. **Come to class prepared.** Before class, make a good-faith effort to think through the pre-class activity, and try to come to class prepared to participate in discussion.

5. **When in doubt, frame your statement as a question.**

6. *Yes and:* When someone says something and you don't exactly agree, instead of saying "No" (or otherwise outright disagreeing), you can start your response with "Yes, and" to directly build on their point. For example, if someone says "I think oppression affects everyone", you could say "yes, and it affects certain people differently, depending on their identities."

7. **Check in.** It is an inclusive practice to regularly check in with your group and make sure everyone is feeling okay about the discussion. For a more structured check-in, you can pause and have everyone share something that they think is going well in the discussion, and one thing they think could go better (people are free to pass).

8. **Actively create space.** If some people are talking much less than others, create space for them to chime in by asking them if they want to share, amplifying an earlier idea they shared, or asking the group to reset the discussion dynamics. If you have been talking a lot, you can also step back and wait to give your own comment.

9. **Use structured discussion to ensure the space is shared equally.**
   - **Popcorn Method:** when someone finishes sharing their thought, they "popcorn" the mic to someone else, i.e., they call on someone else to share (people are free to pass). When using this method, try not to call on the same person twice before all others have shared in between.
   - **Round robin:** go around in a circle, where each person takes a turn sharing one thought (people are free to pass).

C. Synthesis Activity Instructions

Instructions: Groups can choose from any of the following discussion-facilitating activities. Afterwards, all groups will have 1-2 minutes to share takeaways. You will record your work on each activity using the collaborative resources in your group's google drive folder (see course website / syllabus for link). Below each activity, we suggest a resource. You can use the provided documents more than once, each week starting a new page.

Synthesis Activities

1. Three takeaways
As a group, share your ideas on the core question and write down three takeaways that would be useful to share with the class.

Suggested resource: Google docs

2. Q&A
As a group, brainstorm some rich, complex, and/or difficult questions related to this week's content (it's okay if you don't know the answers!). Once you've come up with these questions, you can pick one to discuss.

Suggested resource: Google docs

3. How-to cheat sheet
Is there a task or set of strategies covered in class your group feels are hard to remember, or that you think others should know how to do? Create a how-to cheat sheet listing, describing how to do, and giving examples for, strategies. For example, on the topic of intent versus impact (week 4), one could make a list of tips for how to apologize in a way that engages with the impact of their actions, rather than the intent.

Suggested resource: Google doc, Google slides

4. Propose a Solution
Identify an opportunity for improvement that you see around you, and propose an idea (can be a policy, a resource, or an initiative) to address it. In doing so, try to connect the problem to the key core questions / lenses of the day, and discuss how those connections can inform your solution.

Suggested resource: Google doc, Google slides

5. Concept Mapping / Visual Discussion
Find connections between the various nodes, which can be key terms (see the Class Glossary), lenses, readings, etc. draw different connections between topics and write explanations of those connections. Everyone should share the responsibility of writing.

Suggested resource: Google jamboard, Google slides

6. Sticky Map Cluster

First, write various thoughts about the core question, readings, and lecture. Then, as a group, try to find patterns and groups and create a sticky map.

Suggested resource: Google jamboard

7. Skit of a Scenario

Create a 1-2 minute scenario that touches on the core question / other topics of class. Then, if everyone is comfortable (being mindful of triggers), act it out. For example, your scenario could demonstrate how to apply a strategy, or what an inclusive / non-inclusive dialogue looks like in a particular context. <u>You will not be asked to perform your skit for the class</u>.

Suggested resource: Google doc

8. Stage a debate

Create a mock debate surrounding the core question (or a closely-related question) that highlights the nuances of the topics. Whether you explicitly pick sides or not, this means coming up with arguments on multiple sides of the question. <u>You do not have to perform your debate for the class</u>.

Suggested resource: Google doc, Google jamboard

9. Share some experiences

If everyone is comfortable participating in such a discussion (remember: make sure to explicitly ask, and create space for people to say no; also, not everyone has to share), you can share some experiences related to the core question / lenses of the week. For this one, recall the community guideline about confidentiality.

Students are also welcome to propose their own discussion activity.

If your group wants to do an activity other than these, flag an instructor (in the remote setting, pop back to the main room, there will be an instructor there) to get feedback and quick tips on how to carry out your idea. Please let the instructors know if they can provide any additional supplies or resources, and they will try to secure them by the next class.

D. Options for resolving issues in discussion

If there is an issue, step #1 is to pause the discussion.

Pausing is part of a healthy discussion, and you can support yourself and your peers by welcoming everyone to pause the discussion at any time, for any reason.
Discussions may be paused multiple times each day, to allow the group to reset, check in with each other, refocus, or take other steps to address issues.
Some possible reasons to pause the discussion: you are uncomfortable, you think someone else is uncomfortable, you don't feel comfortable with a topic being discussed, or the discussion is unfocused, unbalanced, or otherwise not going well.

Why pausing can help: it allows discussion participants to take a breath, decompress from in-the-moment stress, and open up space for people to advocate for themselves or bring up issues.

How to pause: you can simply simply say "pause", request that the group take a quick pause, or your group can also establish a nonverbal system, such as laying down a colored piece of paper on the table (or, if remote, typing in the chat).

The rest of this section describes paths the group can take, once the discussion is paused.

Option 1: Work within your group.
We encourage you to try this option first. There are multiple ways to work within your group:

- **Request to revisit community guidelines (section A) or discussion tips (section B).**
  E.g., "Can we revisit guideline number 4? I wonder if we can change our dynamic to better uphold that guideline". Try to use the tips when doing so, like using "I" statements.

- **Check in with your group.**
  Go in a circle and have everyone share one thing they are enjoying about the discussion and one thing that could be going better (people have the option to pass).

- **Refocus with a relaxation or Headspace exercise.**
  Ask if everyone would like to join in taking a deep breath, or go through a short mindfulness exercise via the Headspace app if your group needs to refocus.

Option 2: Have an instructor join your group.

The instructors are trained in moderating and facilitating difficult dialogues. Below are some ways they can support your group in maintaining a healthy, balanced discussion. To flag down an instructor in the remote format, have a group member enter the main zoom room, where there will always be an instructor.

- **Have the instructor join your discussion as a moderator for the day.**
  As a moderator, the instructor can help your discussion stay on-track. Note that a moderator is not going to drive the discussion or play "discussion ping-pong" (ask a question, hear an answer, and then ask another question); driving the discussion remains students' responsibility.

- **Have the instructor lead a debrief or de-escalation exercise.**
  Appendix A contains information about more formal exercises for de-briefing after a particularly intense moment of discussion. If your group wants to debrief, feel free to request this from an instructor.

Option 3: Leave the discussion.

We encourage students to enforce their boundaries, and we recognize that this may sometimes involve leaving the discussion. *As such, students are permitted to leave the discussion at any time.* If you decide to leave the discussion, you are free to leave class for the day. If you do leave, please email or arrange a meeting with the instructor explaining what happened (in as much detail as you are willing to share) and what actions you would like taken, if any.

- **If you want to signal to your group that you are leaving:**
  You can pause the discussion, and then use a simple "I" statement, such as "I am not comfortable participating in this discussion, so to take care of myself, I am leaving class for today".

- **If you want to show your support for someone in your group who is leaving:**
  You can do so by saying something like "thank you for taking care of yourself".

Option 4: Alert the course instructors about how they can better support you.

If you feel frequently uncomfortable or excluded in your group's discussions, there is a person you feel that you cannot safely be grouped with in the future, or there is some other personal reason why discussion might be harmful to you, **please let the instructors know in as much detail as you feel comfortable.**

You can alert an instructor about group-related issues by...
- Emailing or talking with the course instructors or course consultants (see Syllabus)
- Leaving a note in the anonymous feedback form (linked on the website and the syllabus), which is frequently checked by instructors.

In response, a few different actions can be taken depending on what the issue is:
- An instructor can join your group as a moderator for one or more weeks
- An instructor can speak with one or more individuals privately.
- Other outcomes can also be discussed, but actions will not be taken without the approval of the reporter.

Appendix A

Debrief Procedure. The debriefing procedure can be used if the discussion became heated or uncomfortable, or if other difficult dynamics arose.

If a debrief is requested (or recommended by the instructor and agreed to by the students in the group), the instructor, acting as a moderator, will facilitate the following procedure:

> ➢ Have everyone take a minute to think about what just happened. Encourage people to write anything down that would be helpful, and to reference the community guidelines while doing so.

> ➢ Then, the moderator starts a high-level discussion. The moderator should explicitly check in with each person throughout this discussion, and make sure their thoughts are being heard and represented. The discussion can take the following form:
>
>   1. Create a space for anyone who wants to share their feelings (not accusations), what they thought was going well, and what they thought was going not-so-well.
>
>   2. Open up the floor for people to share suggestions for how similar situations could be better addressed or avoided altogether in the future. If concrete suggestions come out, the group can add to their community discussion guidelines.
>
>   3. Provide closure: thank everyone for sharing their thoughts.

De-escalation exercises. Instead of a debrief, your group (guided by an instructor) can also do one of the de-escalation exercises in the [Eberly Center guide to difficult dialogues](#) (de-escalation exercises start on pg. 9 as numbered).