

The background features a light beige gradient with numerous colorful speech bubbles in shades of orange, red, yellow, green, blue, and purple. A dark blue banner with rounded corners is centered horizontally, containing the title text. At the bottom, there is a teal gradient area with a dark blue curved shape separating it from the main beige area.

# Informed Discussions

Civil and Respectful Communication,  
Discourse & Debate in the Classroom

**A Faculty Guide**

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# Your Valuable Role

Higher education is a setting infused with debate and discourse designed to encourage thinking and learning among students. As you well know, one of your roles as a faculty member is to create deliberate, intentional opportunities for students to engage socially across boundaries. It's certainly not your job to take away the tension that comes with this, but there are some steps you can take to help students handle conflict and controversy with civility. In today's sensitive society, many of us fear taking an unintentional misstep — and the backlash that can ensue. However, you can role model appropriate engagement for students to show them how it's done.

## Agreeing to Disagree

Unfortunately, it's easy for students to find examples of uncivil discourse all around them. From political candidates to reality TV shows to anonymous Tweets and other social media posts, insensitivity and conflict with no accountability can appear to be the norm.

You can help students understand that our community welcomes free speech, yet when language offends, threatens or insults groups based on race, color, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, ability, nationality, political affiliation or other traits, it doesn't contribute to an inclusive community. Purposefully inciting hate and doing harm has no place at an institution of higher learning. Showing students how they can agree to disagree — with honesty and respect — is of great value to all.

Discomfort, challenge and dissonance are all parts of the educational process — and you can create an environment where individuals have the courage to speak up, instead of the fear of experiencing harm, in the name of learning. Creating a safe space where free dialogue can occur is one way to facilitate controversial conversations with civility, helping students grow into engaged, respectful global citizens. You are in a valued position to do this, amidst today's heightened racial, political and cultural tensions.



# Microaggressions & Marginalized Groups

Microaggressions are those everyday verbal, nonverbal and environmental slights — whether intentional or unintentional — that are indicative of an undercurrent of social tension. Statements like, “Where were you born?” and “You people are so inspiring” may seem like innocent sentiments, but in reality they undermine student persistence and academic success. They can also create a larger divide and have a cumulative impact, leaving marginalized group members feeling unheard, unsafe and unwelcome. Unfortunately, microaggressions run rampant across campus, even among people with the best of intentions.

You play an important role in maintaining a safe and secure community — both in and out of the classroom. Things like refusing to use preferred gender pronouns, asking students of color to represent the thoughts of others “like them” and polarizing students based on their political viewpoints are all examples of microaggressions regularly happening within higher education today. The more you commit to reinforcing a climate of diversity, equity and inclusion, the more likely you’ll be to facilitate safe, open dialogue.

## When Missteps Happen

If people unintentionally make prejudicial or offensive comments, you can help them:

- Remember that impact always carries more weight than intent
- Not dismiss or diminish the feelings at hand
- Try not to get defensive
- Recognize that they took a misstep and learn how not to do it again

We are all human. You’ll demonstrate your commitment to civility by acknowledging the misstep, validating feelings and engaging in conversation to expand individuals’ knowledge — plus you’ll be modeling an important skill set for students as they prepare to enter the professional workplace.

### The Impact of Microaggressions

Microaggressions can take a toll on marginalized groups, causing:

- » Constant vigilance and uncertainty
- » Self-doubt
- » Fear that bringing it up could hurt a relationship or career path
- » A feeling of not belonging
- » A change in natural behavior
- » Pressure to act “right,” like the majority
- » A lack of trust in majority/privileged group members

# Elements of an Inclusive Classroom

Classroom climates that promote civil communication, discourse and debate include the expectation that people will:

- Practice civility and respectful behavior
- Actively work to include everyone and to eliminate oppression
- Assume good intent, but explore the unintended impact of comments and behaviors
- Seek to listen and to learn
- Encourage and acknowledge different perspectives
- Challenge opinions respectfully
- Be honest
- Be aware of the lens through which they view the world
- Take risks
- Respect and maintain confidentiality
- Share air time
- Engage in respectful disagreement
- Recognize their hot buttons and work to positively manage them
- Trust in the dialogue, even when it's difficult
- Acknowledge that “moving towards” is movement and celebrate this

## The Importance of Self-Work

We all have conflict hot buttons. As a facilitator of difficult conversations, it's important to recognize yours so you don't get caught off guard or react in a way that unintentionally escalates a conflict.

Ask yourself:

- » Who am I?
- » What am I carrying with me?

By knowing your triggers, you'll be better able to focus your energy on students as they find common ground and work through conflict in a civil way.

## Equal vs. Equitable

Students sometimes get tripped up when it comes to the difference between equal and equitable, and it can lead to conflict. Here's a simple example you can share with them to help clarify the concepts:

Imagine two students sitting in a classroom lecture. Both have equal access to the verbal lesson and opportunity to learn. But one student was the last to arrive and the only seat left was in the back of a huge auditorium. That student happens to use a hearing aid. While access is equal, it's not equitable.

Reminding students that equality means giving everybody the same thing, regardless of what they need, while equity is about giving everyone a fair shot so inequality doesn't continue, can help diffuse misunderstandings about access and inclusion.

# Difficult Conversations in the Classroom

You know how to facilitate learning. It's ingrained in you as an educator. Yet today's unsettled world can make this more difficult at times. Many educators are worried about doing or saying the "wrong" thing. They are afraid of causing conflict, triggering emotion, or igniting a campus disruption or dangerous confrontation.

Here are some tools that can help you facilitate difficult conversations in your classroom:

- Communicate your commitment to the institution's mission and vision.
- Consistently treat everyone with respect, dignity and care.
- Accept responsibility for the welfare of the entire class.
- Create a learning environment based on honest interactions.
- Set up ground rules for civil discourse and revisit them regularly.
- Hold students accountable for harmful or offensive comments and behaviors.
- Continually assess group dynamics through the lens of equity and inclusion to ensure that all students have an opportunity to contribute and feel heard.
- Watch body language and tone, and challenge students to explore their reactions.
- Acknowledge and validate feelings, explore solutions and summarize dialogue to help encourage understanding.
- Teach students how to respond effectively after they make an exclusionary or prejudicial comment — and how to recognize when their biases or assumptions may have influenced their emotions or behaviors.
- Show students how to argue passionately, but respectfully — so they learn how to disagree without personalizing their opinions to a specific person or group.
- Recognize common themes of marginalization within discussions.
- Redirect, but don't squelch, conflict when it arises. If need be, agree to take a break and come back to the conversation once emotions are back in check.
- Continually work to deepen your own cultural competencies — and let students know you are doing so.

## Are Your Policies Inclusive?

Consider how your current departmental policies — and those within your specific syllabi — either encourage or hinder equity and inclusion. Are the policies designed to support the academic success of all students, including members of marginalized groups?

# Engaging Resistance

When you challenge students to address questions of social justice and equality, you are asking them to question their fundamental belief systems. Sometimes, they resist this challenge.

In this context, it's important to remember that debate is a process — and a craft. As difficult as it can sometimes be, without dissent there often can't be growth. Consider how you can:

- Get students to challenge the status quo and consider alternative perspectives
- Encourage them to engage in critical self-reflection
- Effectively foster and facilitate critical debates that can often be the most challenging
- Get students to stretch beyond their comfort zones
- Create an appropriate amount of challenge and support
- Recognize your own triggers, so you don't allow them to impede your work

In addition to societal factors that contribute to resistance, sometimes students are just afraid of change. Difficult conversations can make students uncomfortable. But as you well know, it is within this discomfort that students learn a great deal about themselves and others.

To successfully engage students who are resistant in your classroom, you can:

- Ask them to tell you more about *why* they feel or think the way they do
- Not skim over a topic just because it might make them uncomfortable, but do validate their feelings
- Encourage alternative viewpoints while maintaining respectful dialogue
- Interrupt dynamics when things start to go awry — and redirect the conversation rather than cutting it off, reminding participants about the components of civil discourse

## Take Care of Yourself, Too

As students reach their tipping points, they sometimes turn to faculty they trust and identify with for help. This can put you in the position of providing extensive care and advisement — sometimes to your own detriment.

At the same time, you may also worry that potential pitfalls are inevitable or that you'll cause irreparable harm, leaving you wondering how to speak up and respond effectively.

In the midst of it all, it's important that you take care of yourself, too.

# Managing Classroom Dynamics

## Privileged Groups:

- Define what is normal
- Make the rules
- Have greater access to power and resources
- Generally assumed to be “greater than” or “better than”
- Given the benefit of the doubt
- Often unaware of privilege

## Marginalized Groups:

- Have less access to power and resources
- Generally assumed to be “less than,” “inferior” or “deficient”
- Often feel the need to assimilate or to fit in
- Have their truth and experiences questioned and invalidated
- Relegated to the outer edge of society/community
- Very aware of oppression

## The Impact on Classroom Dynamics

Privileged groups and marginalized groups lend unique dynamics to every classroom conversation that may become heightened in times of conflict. Your ability to recognize these dynamics and respond accordingly can make all the difference in successfully facilitating discourse and debate that remains civil, even when it’s controversial.

Some things to keep in mind include:

- There is both visible and invisible privilege and marginalization — and some students will experience both
- Privilege and marginalization can’t be changed or chosen — it’s innate. This can create frustration for some.
- The need for privileged group members to sometimes feel like they have to defend themselves
- The challenge marginalized group members sometimes feel with finding their voice or speaking up
- Sometimes those who are privileged are unaware of their privilege
- Sometimes those who are marginalized are afraid of challenging the status quo out of fear of being punished

## Being an Inclusive Leader

You can do a great deal to demonstrate your commitment to inclusivity, such as:

- » Infusing equity and inclusion into your teaching and advising strategies
- » Acknowledging your own missteps
- » Respectfully and educationally interrupting microaggressions when they occur
- » Regularly assessing your policies and climate to identify embedded bias or unintended impact on members of marginalized groups
- » Challenging campus policies and practices that aren’t inclusive
- » Continuing to develop your multicultural competence

# In a Community of Character...

We don't tolerate discrimination based on race, gender identity, religion, faith, ability, sexual orientation, size, socioeconomic status, age or ethnicity.

Tough topics are discussed face-to-face, not behind people's backs.

There's an environment that welcomes multiple ideas and multiple ways of thought.

We celebrate the accomplishments of others rather than being threatened by them.

People do their own work, and never take credit for that of others.

We don't take advantage of the kindness of others.

Trust is the name of the game.

Treating others' property with care is how it's done.

We leave a place better than we found it.

People ask, "How are you?" and stick around for the answer.

We admit when we're wrong instead of playing the blame game – and learn from our mistakes.

People want to improve the world and enjoy it, too.

Interruptions are infrequent. After all, it's not just about us.

We listen to the views of others, even if we don't agree.

There are always *at least* two sides to an argument.

We rise to the challenge instead of hiding behind what's "safe."

There's an awareness of "How will my actions impact others?"

We look out for one another.

We teach one another and willingly accept what we can learn from one another.

There's a desire to go beyond first impressions.

We treat people fairly, kindly and with compassion.

Everyone is encouraged to get involved and share their special gifts.

Everyday moments, as well as big accomplishments, are celebrated.

Respect is earned – and mutual.

We seek to include people, not exclude them.

We look for the good in people and honor the content of their character.

*By Julie Phillips*