Pod C: Discussing and Facilitating

# Creating Community Discussion Guidelines

Small or large group discussions are an important teaching tool in classes of all sizes. Establishing the purpose of discussions--generally and for specific topics--and setting guidelines for your students can help to ensure that all students’ voices are heard and that discussions lead to meaningful learning outcomes. In this activity we will consider our goals for discussions and some guidelines we might introduce.

Any good discussion should be grounded in purpose. There are many reasons to include discussion in your courses, and particularly, discussion of potentially controversial topics.

Consider:Why do we open our classrooms to student discussion? Why do we teach controversial subjects or address difficult subjects in class? What are our goals for our students when we implement a discussion? *Write your goals for discussion here:*

On the first day of class, you can take some time to introduce basic community guidelines for discussion. Explain the significance of these to your students and remind students of the guidelines before engaging in class discussions. It’s easy to have a slide listing the guidelines that you can insert every time before discussion questions. Here are some guidelines you may wish to consider including:

Assume best intentions. Everyone is here to learn, and we all have gaps in our knowledge.

Commit to learning, not debating**.** Arguing isn’t the same thing as discussion. Openness and respect for others’ perspectives is key to a healthy discussion, not the desire to be “right.”

Everyone is invited to speak from their own perspective. Use “I” statements and avoid assuming things about the experiences of others.

Step forward, step back. Notice who is speaking and how much space you are taking in the discussion. Be prepared to step back to hear from others, and be prepared to step up if you haven’t contributed to the discussion.

Listen respectfully and fully. Pay attention and engage meaningfully with others’ ideas.

Accommodate needs.If anyone needs a particular environment or considerations from the instructor and/or fellow students to contribute to the class, we will all accommodate these requirements.

**Reflect:** What other community discussion guidelines might be helpful for students? How can we establish healthy classroom norms to create a vibrant and safe discussion? What guidelines will help our students achieve the goals we have for discussion? Use this space to create a foundational set of community guidelines for your class—consider including guidelines for recording breakout-room discussions or group chats to ensure student privacy.

**Process:** Use this space to plan for how you will encourage students to add to and revise these community guidelines.

Before class:

During class:

After class/throughout the semester:

**Remote Teaching:** Here are some factors to consider to create an online space where all students can be heard.

1. Cameras: Being on camera may be intimidating. Remind your class that they can turn off their cameras during large group discussions, or simply hide their self-view to reduce feelings of self-consciousness.
2. Make use of the chat: Allow students to add to discussions by adding their thoughts to the chat. If you don’t feel comfortable keeping track of what’s going on in the chat while facilitating discussion, consider appointing a TA or a student to be the chat monitor each day. Make sure they know that they can jump in to highlight a point that’s being made in text.
3. Be clear about privacy: Make sure students know if, when, and which class materials will be recorded and shared.
4. Use breakout rooms: Many students feel more comfortable speaking up in a smaller group.
5. Create an asynchronous option: Campus-supported options include Panopto, VoiceThread, and WarpWire.
6. Refer to [Keep Teaching](http://keepteaching.unc.edu/), [The Center for Faculty Excellence](http://cfe.unc.edu/), and the [CFE Essentials for Remote Teaching course on Sakai](https://sakai.unc.edu/x/fRjkqg) for more guidance.

# Steps to Facilitating Equitable and Inclusive Discussions

1. Start on common groundby providing a framing reading or other resource, like a video or a podcast. Start the discussion with contextualizing questions:
   1. Clarify the problem or question.
   2. What do we know? What data are needed or relevant?
   3. What are the characteristics of an acceptable solution (or response, etc)?
   4. What are possible solutions/responses/next steps?
2. Remind students of classroom guidelines for discussion (see handout on establishing purpose and setting guidelines for group discussion).
3. Create multiple modes of participation. You may start a discussion with a think-pair-share or small groups before bringing the whole class together (see handout on active learning techniques for more ideas). Encourage students to add comments or questions via handwritten note cards or whiteboards in face-to-face classes, responding to an online poll, or contributing to a shared editable document.

Think:What are some potential sources of conflict in your content area? List below any topics you discuss in class to which students have responded emotionally in the past, or that have led to problematic/potentially harmful interactions among students.

Discuss: A common discussion challenge is the conflict between marginalized (or critical) and structurally dominant narratives (those that represent the status quo or an oppressive or more powerful position). What is a structurally dominant narrative and a connectedcritical or marginalized perspective that come up, or could come up, in your class?

Dominant narrative:

Critical perspective:

For specific and in-depth techniques on this topic, see handout on countering dominant narratives for an in-depth facilitation technique.

1. Anticipate heated moments--and help your students make the most of them.
2. Call for a timeout if necessary.It’s ok to pause or end a discussion that has become toxic, harmful, or simply unproductive, but it can be hard to do in the moment. You might also consider not calling on students who have been dominating the discussion, inviting students to “step up, step back” and allow other perspectives to be voiced.

Think and discuss:What are some words, phrases, or tactics that you might use to call a timeout in class?

1. Take note of what perspectives are being represented**.** You can ask a TA to note, for example, how many women-identifying students and male-identifying students raise their hands and who gets called on. This can show you both who is feeling included in the discussion and who you tend to call on. Having this information allows you to adjust your facilitation techniques to ensure that all your students are being included.
2. Redirect to writingif you find that a few students or just one point of view is dominating the conversation, or if the discussion has become problematic in other ways (for example, students are becoming hostile to each other). Ask students to spend 5 minutes (or the remainder of class time) writing their thoughts on the subject. Collect these and offer some summary and synthesis at the beginning of the next class.

# Countering Dominant Narratives: A Discussion Guide

A common teaching challenge is the conflict between marginalized (or critical) and structurally dominant narratives (those that represent the status quo or more powerful position). You can prepare yourself to facilitate through such conflicts in a way that will lead to learning for all students and foster belonging for students who identify with marginalized groups. *Throughout this exercise, suggested in-class techniques will be presented in italics.*

 Consider the following scenario: In a classroom discussion, a marginalized perspective or narrative is challenged. The student challenging the perspective brings up a dominant narrative that, through its cultural prominence carries more weight and credibility with the majority of students than the marginalized narrative. For example, in conversations about immigration, students may raise the point that strict policy is important because undocumented immigrants are a drain on the resources that should only be available to tax-paying citizens. This argument is likely familiar to the students, and many may take the rationale behind it as a given. However, it is something of a red herring that assumes citizenship as an entitlement (rather than an unearned privilege), and it doesn’t account for the fact that undocumented [immigrants often pay into social security](https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/09/undocumented-immigrants-and-taxes/499604/) without ever being able to collect retirement benefits. *Giving the student’s dominant narrative (DN) equal floor time can add to the already unequal power it carries, but dismissing the student’s explanation can be perceived as unfair or biased*. Ignoring the DN fails to address the existing weight and power their explanation carries. The problem needs to be addressed by illuminating and interrogating the DNs and giving students the skills to critically interrogate DNs themselves.

## Part 1: Making dominant/critical narratives visible.

1. On the board, write or project the initial critical perspective you or a student raised. This should represent a marginalized perspective or a narrative that challenges a dominant narrative. If a student raised this perspective, make sure that this is what they meant. Adjust as needed.
2. On the board, write or project the DN that a student raised in response to the critical perspective. Make sure that this is what the student who raised the DN meant. Adjust as needed.

## Part 2: Questions for understanding the greater context.

Help your students interrogate the DN by contextualizing it. You can use the following questions directly or use them as inspiration for context-focused questions that will best address the DN you are working with. Present context questions in any form that is most useful to you, such as in a handout or as a loose guide for your own reference during a discussion. Track important contextual insights on the board**.**

1. Is the DN familiar to you? From whom have you heard it previously and in what contexts? (a friend in a social setting, a professor in a business class, a blogger on a media website, a scholarly article in a cultural studies journal, etc.)
2. How does the source and context of this DN help you understand the function of this claim? In the context in which you heard it previously, why was it raised?
3. Who might benefit from this DN? In what ways do they benefit by furthering this narrative? How do they contribute to the furthering of this narrative?
4. Who else might have a stake in this narrative? How are they benefited or harmed by it?

## Part 3: Questions for recognizing assumptions

1. What assumptions does this DN depend on to hold up as a logical response to the critical perspective?  Write students’ responses on the board or project them so you can refer back to these. Help them refine the assumptions to be as specific and thorough as possible.
2. What would evidence for each of these claims look like? Do you expect that there is sufficient evidence supporting these assumptions? Why?
3. Optional: have students search for the evidence for these claims, taking note of the credibility of their sources.
4. Ask: Given the lack of credible evidence to support these assumptions, how do we explain why the DN is so widely accepted as true and reasonable?

## Part 4: Questions for further interrogating the assumptions they’ve identified

These questions should press on what might be problematic or incomplete about the DN as a response to the critical perspective. You can also have your students divide into groups and compose questions about each assumption themselves, giving a few examples of the kinds of questions you’re looking for.

## Part 5: Questions for debriefing

Ask: Based on what we’ve interrogated about the DN, do you think it adequately responds to the initial critical perspective? Why or why not? (You might choose to define for your students what a red herring is and explain how they function rhetorically.)

Why do you think this explanation carries so much weight? Remind students that many in the class were familiar with the DN raised, and that most agreed there was a sympathetic logic to the explanation.

Review the steps students can take when interrogating DN’s and why they require this rigor.

1. Identify the DN and what narratives it responds to
2. Understand its context (who says it and why)
3. Recognize the assumptions of the DN
4. Interrogate what may be problematic, incomplete, or taken for granted about its assumptions and why

## Next steps

This discussion can be referred back to whenever a DN is raised in the class or in a student’s writing to encourage students to think critically about their assumptions and investment in dominant narratives. You can also continue a focus on perfectly logical explanations by having them do independent research and writing on a DN of their choosing (you can provide them with a list to choose from or encourage them to use one they have encountered in their lives).

Citations

Resource developed and hosted by LSA Inclusive Teaching Initiative, University of Michigan (<http://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/>).