LET FREEDOM (AND RESPECT) RING:

Fostering Civil Discourse and Free Speech in the Classroom and Beyond

Four Modules for Classroom Instructors

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Introduction

In an increasingly polarized era when college campuses are often the backdrops for clashes over controversial ideas, we are often told that higher education's values of intellectual freedom and commitment to diversity and respect are in tension with one another. As professors who have developed many courses and worked with thousands of college students, we disagree.

Rather, we believe that robust, respectful, and effective discourse in a diverse learning community is a skill to be mastered—not a limitation on liberty. When we offer students the tools and framework for college-level inquiry and communication, we are engaging in a core function of our roles as teachers—much like when we teach them to write a clear and provable thesis or a well-structured paragraph. And like the other learning objectives we pursue in our courses, college-level discourse can (and should) be taught.

This is a unit for faculty, teaching assistants, and peer leaders who want their classrooms to be communities of trust where open and respectful communication flourishes; where students have multiple ways to engage in collaboration and listening; and where all members practice the fundamentals of engaging with new ideas as readers, listeners, speakers, and writers. In the four written modules and accompanying videos, we offer practical approaches for courses in any discipline, whether in-person or online.

Our unit is based on the following ideas, which infuse each module:

- Respectful academic discourse is a skill to be mastered, not a limitation on freedom
- Common purpose is what makes tough conversations possible
- Discourse is about more than speech
- Listening, inquiring, reading, and questioning are all elements of college discourse

- Faculty teach best when we are explicit, transparent, and define our terms to students
- Investing time to build trust and lay the groundwork for a course is always worth it

With these ideas in mind, we have developed four modules that cover distinct elements of a college course where robust discourse thrives. An overview of the each of the modules is presented here:

Module 1: Re-imagining course engagement in person and online
Many courses include a grade for "class participation." Most often, students assume this means a combination of attendance, preparation, and volunteering to speak. In this section, we offer methods of defining, fostering, and assessing student engagement in the course, including through traditional in-person engagement as well as online participation, both synchronous and asynchronous. From syllabus language to learning management system tools, this lesson provides multiple ways to get students speaking and listening.

Module 2: Creating and maintaining inclusive classroom communities
Discussions about inclusive classrooms start with a frame of mind and a deep-seated understanding that inclusion is at the core of an educational journey. Tense interactions and diverse opinions are a crucial part of these inclusive spaces. In this section, we identify important elements of an inclusive teaching experience, provide tips for interrupting bias during class discussions, and offer techniques for responding to hot moments in class. We show that it is entirely possible to create inclusive classrooms regardless of the course delivery platform.

Module 3: Setting community standards for learning
Community standards created as a collaboration between a faculty member and their students can serve as a framework for inclusive classroom learning. Once these standards are adopted, they become the framework for accountable classroom communication. Not only do community standards for learning inform the tenor of classroom discussions, but they also encourage students to reach outside of their comfort zones and engage in discourse across differences. In this section, we suggest themes and ideas for creating community standards for both in-person and online formats.

Module 4: Assessments and assignments for collaboration and productive dialogue
Many students dread group work because of concerns about unequal burdens and contributions. But collaboration can build respect and trust; require effective communication skills and compromise; and provide an opportunity for productive discourse. In this module, we explore assignments and assessment methods that foster and reward collaboration and help students practice the "community skills" that are essential to a learning community where robust discourse thrives.

MODULE 1:
Re-imagining course engagement in person and online

Many students report that they learn the most in college through engagement with peers – whether in class discussions, working on projects, or socially. Our courses can be places where students learn to engage deeply with material and with each other; tackle challenging ideas; and practice perspective taking and listening. Speaking, listening, collaborating, asking great questions, and engagement with others are all college-level skills that we also recognize as essential to post-graduate education, careers, and civic engagement. But if we simply give a grade for "class participation" without explaining what that means, students often assume that mere hand-raising is all we want. And because class participation is generally a small part of the grade, it is not always a sufficient inducement even to do that.

There is a more effective way.

We can and should design our courses to encourage, recognize, assess, and reward engagement. In this module, we'll explore new definitions of course engagement that work with course objectives, offer ways to build this work into assessments, and provide discussion guidelines to maximize student engagement.

Learning objectives

1. Re-define course engagement to engage more learners and tie to course objectives
2. Consider collaborative models of defining and assessing course engagement
3. Explore discussion practices and prompts (synchronous and asynchronous) that maximize course engagement

Re-define course engagement to engage more learners and tie to course objectives

Does this sound familiar? A student stays quiet in class throughout the semester, then writes a final paper that is sophisticated, thoughtful, passionate, and demonstrates deep engagement with the course materials—including ideas shared in class discussion. When this does happen, it's natural to have mixed feelings—it's good to know that students really are learning even if we're not seeing it, but also feels like a

missed opportunity for other students to learn from such a thoughtful peer. For many instructors, stories like this one join other powerful reasons not to assess so-called class participation or to weigh it very lightly.

Other reasons include:

- Concern that some eager students will dominate the discussion in pursuit of a good grade
- Anxiety created among shy students
- Unfairness toward students with language disabilities or language learners
- Recognition that other skills such as listening are just as important to the learning process.

Professors who have de-emphasized "class participation" out of recognition of these or other concerns, are already part of the way toward designing for greater engagement. Our next step is to re-embrace course engagement by replacing "class participation" with a definition of course engagement that harmonizes with the course learning objectives.

An alternative definition of course engagement might include any or all of the following actions:

- Attendance[1]
- Communicating with professor or TAs in office hours or by email
- Supporting peers, such as by helping them catch up on missed material, offering or accepting peer review of assignments[2]
- Researching course topics and doing additional readings (encourage students to share interesting readings on the course Learning Management System (LMS)[3]page or on a shareable document created for that purpose)
- Preparing for class every day
- Listening respectfully
- Setting and meeting individual goals for course engagement (see below)
- Contributing in small-group discussions and exercises (see below)
- Contributing to discussions on LMS discussion boards
- Applying course concepts and ideas to current events
- The *quality* of classroom contributions, for example:
    - Engaging thoughtfully with peers' contributions
    - Considering multiple perspectives on an issue
    - Asking thoughtful questions

Next steps

As faculty, we should first consider our course learning objectives – both content and skills. How can course engagement action items like those above (or others) align with our overall objectives? This will depend upon the type of course being taught. For example, "applying course concepts and ideas to current events" might be important in a political science course.

Second, for each content and skills learning objective, we should consider a mode of course engagement that would support that objective. For example, if the course objectives include developing research methods skills, finding and contributing additional readings could reinforce that objective.

We will now have a list of course engagement action items to add to the syllabus and discuss with students on the first day of class (or in the first recorded online lecture). It is often helpful to have a separate document of class policies and procedures that includes course engagement.[4] In the next section, we will explore how to add students' individual engagement goals to these. After that, we will look at discussion prompts and class exercises that encourage these other forms of engagement.

Consider collaborative models of defining and assessing course engagement

Professors should introduce students to an expanded definition of course engagement both through the syllabus language and in the first class meeting. But it doesn't end there. Course engagement goals can differ from student to student—and setting and meeting these goals can help students become more committed to the course in general.

LMS tools can help us turn course engagement planning and assessment into a collaborative process. One strategy is to use an online syllabus quiz at the beginning of the semester. For the first or second course meeting, the professor might assign the syllabus and the quiz. In the quiz, students might be asked to consider the syllabus language on course engagement and then have the opportunity to:

- Identify challenges and barriers they might have to course engagement (for example, students in other time zones might have a hard time with synchronous elements of an online course)
- Reaffirm they understand the course expectations and policies (for example, attendance, extensions) outlined in the syllabus (and if applicable, the class policies and procedures document)
- Introduce themselves and describe their interest in the course
- Identify a goal or goals for course engagement (from among a list or something original)
- Identify other goals—for example, improving their writing or time management.

We recommend that this quiz is a non-graded but mandatory assignment.

Some LMS (such as Blackboard) also offer an anonymous survey option. It is easy to view and download answers in the aggregate and get a sense of the class as a whole and elicit information about, for example, whether students are concerned about expressing unpopular views. Professors could check in with students about their goals through additional quizzes or surveys; in office hours; or in class discussions.

A mid-semester discussion about course engagement and progress toward goals can be particularly useful for first-year students, who are also adjusting to the new expectations and practices of college. It is also helpful to informally evaluate students' course engagement at mid-semester and offer advice about how to continue to improve.

It is helpful to acknowledge when students are demonstrating great classroom engagement. This encourages others to do the same. Here are some suggested ways of communicating about student progress:

- Noting when a student asks an important question; letting students know that asking questions can raise the level of discourse in a classroom, and can be a sign of higher-order thinking—not ignorance
- Highlightinging student contributions to online discussion boards in lessons (or recorded lectures)
- Directing students' attention to contributions on the suggested readings document
- Indicating when students have participated in great discussions during office hours, and encourage students to join in
- Pointing out when students have been thoughtful in navigating difference or acknowledging nuance

At the conclusion of the course, it is good practice to ask the students to suggest their own course engagement grades based upon the syllabus language and their personal goals. It might be helpful to use a quiz on your LMS to do so. Students should explain their reasoning, and if applicable, incorporate attendance and frequency of contributions to online discussion boards. This exercise not only enables us as professors to incorporate many modes of engagement into students' course grade; it provides useful feedback about how students pursue their goals; which elements of the course attracted most students; and how they perceive their own progress in the course. The professor retains the power to set the final grade, and we recommend providing written feedback on course engagement, just as if it were a paper or essay. This is an advantage of using an online quiz or assignment as well. Using a rubric is also an available option.

Next steps

First, plan to ask students about their individual goals. This can be done online or as a reflection during class time. Professors should plan to check in with students about their progress toward their goals, soliciting their feedback and offering their own. Students must know that course engagement is being assessed, what it consists of, and that they will need to suggest a grade and explain their reasoning. And finally, assign students a course engagement reflection that becomes the basis for their final grades.

In the next section, we will explore ways to maximize engagement across the course.

Explore discussion practices and prompts (synchronous and asynchronous) that maximize course engagement

When we define engagement broadly and collaborate with students in setting engagement goals, we set the stage for more robust conversations. Next, we look at ways to maximize engagement in each class session (or online discussion assignment). We recommend preparing students for class discussion in advance, frequently utilizing small groups, and encouraging students to engage directly with peers' contributions.

Class participation prep prompts

The typical syllabus entry tells students what they will read or write for a given class period. Some faculty add a descriptive title for each class session, week, or segment of the course. For many students, particularly first-year students unaccustomed to college-level discourse, it is challenging to see the connection between assigned readings and class discussion topics in advance. Students report that it can be hard to take notes without knowing what the instructor hopes they take away from the reading. Some students who comprehend the reading might still lack confidence about contributing in class without some sense of how to prepare. The syllabus can do some heavy lifting here and prepare students to contribute. In addition to assigned readings and writing prompts, consider adding a statement about what the class discussion will be.

Here are some examples of class participation preparation language from a government course on speech (each is from a different class session):

- Consider how the executive order on free speech could promote or inhibit the goals of higher education and the values of the campus free speech movement.
- Prepare to discuss the relationship (if any) between guest speakers and the university's mission. Prepare to discuss Ahmadinejad's speech at Columbia and how the university chose to respond.
- Prepare to discuss what it means to think historically. Consider what types of evidence we should consider in determining what the Confederate Flag means.
- Prepare to discuss whether and when a commercial transaction constitutes "speech."

These prompts can be quite useful for students who set a goal of speaking up more in class. In our classes, office hours, or mid-term check in, we as professors can encourage students to select a few topics to prepare for and plan to volunteer.

Small groups

In years of seeking and reading feedback from students about their course engagement experience, we have found that students enjoy small group discussions. For some instructors, the decision not to be at center stage feels like not doing the work. But just as students' course engagement is about more than speaking up, so is our teaching about more than taking center stage. Here are some ways to maximize the benefit of small group work.

First, tie small group work to the day's learning objectives and class participation prep prompts. Preparation raises confidence and makes it less likely that only the bigger personalities will engage.

Second, give students time to reflect upon the question individually before moving to small groups (or pairs). Students might spend a few minutes writing their initial thoughts.

Third, it can be helpful to remind students to take the time to explore the threshold question, "what do we need to know in order to answer the question before us?" Which course readings apply? What additional research would we have to do to become experts on the topic at hand?

Engaging with peers' contributions

Even in classes where many students are enthusiastically and actively engaging, sometimes we can feel like the hub on a wheel—with each student attempting to talk to the professor rather than with one another. There are simple ways to make the course work more like a web, with connections from student to student.

For courses with synchronous class discussions, professors should explain to students that we do not call on anyone whose hand is up while another student is talking. Ask students to explain the purpose of that practice. Second, we should make clear that we would like people to engage with the points their peers make rather than wait their turn to engage with us.

Even in purely face-to-face class, LMS tools such as course reading journals and discussion boards can help direct students' attention to each other's perspectives and elevate the less forceful voices. For example, if we assign a course reading journal, we may choose a particularly thoughtful comment from a student and introduce it in our course discussion.[5] We recommend putting a quote on a slide and giving the students time to process it. Example:

> David says:
>
> "The expansiveness of Pinker's argument leaves it more vulnerable to criticism. Why, for example, if free speech is inseparable from education and the pursuit of knowledge, does authoritarian China lead the world in college graduates and contributions to scientific journals?"

The original student could have time to explain or expand upon their contribution before we open class discussion on the statement.

We can also prompt students to engage with one another's ideas after class discussions. The following exercise has yielded thoughtful reflections: provide small groups a problem to solve or question to answer. Ask one member of each small group to share that group's solution or answer on the LMS discussion board. Assign the students to select a solution or answer that they feel is better in some way than their own group's answer, and identify something in particular the other group did that or considered that would be an improvement on their own solution, and why.

1. For online or hybrid courses, attendance includes viewing recorded class sessions and posting on the relevant discussion forum for a given class session.
2. We recommend setting peer critique guidelines for students consistent with the institution's academic integrity code. For example, if you would like to offer credit for peer critique, we might offer several options for paper topics and have students review and critique papers on a different topic than their own.
3. For example: Blackboard or Canvas.
4. It is also possible to include language about free speech and expression in a document like this.
5. We suggest that professors let their students know at the beginning of the semester that they might want to share their contributions and tell them that if they do not want a particular journal entry shared, students should indicate that on the entry.

MODULE 2:
Creating and maintaining inclusive classroom communities

Discussions about inclusive classrooms begin with a frame of mind and a deep-seated understanding that inclusion is at the core of an educational journey. In addition to teaching the content and skills specific to our disciplines, our role as college professors is to help our students—all of our students—to learn and thrive. All members of an inclusive classroom should be provided access to an educational environment where they can freely and safely listen and speak.

Regardless if you believe that higher education can be "the great equalizer," it is clear that truly inclusive teaching takes work. Inclusive teaching puts the onus on instructors to recognize our students as young adults with varied life experiences and learning challenges. This module provides ideas for creating classrooms that accommodate our diverse students by identifying some of the important characteristics of inclusive college classrooms and discussing welcoming and respectful listening and speaking.

Learning objectives

1. Define inclusive classrooms and their core role in an educational journey
2. Discuss some important characteristics of inclusive teaching
3. Identify techniques to interrupt bias and discriminatory language in the classroom learning environment

Inclusive college classrooms and their core role in an educational journey

Teaching inclusively requires embracing the diversity among our students, which includes but is not limited to their race, ethnicity, immigration status, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, religion, political ideologies, disabilities, and first-generation status. In addition to their diversity, college students enter our classes with diverse learning differences, educational and professional preparation for college, and language backgrounds.

The diverse demographics and personal experiences students bring to our classrooms all provide the potential for more nuanced class discussions. This diversity also challenges us as instructors. When making a decision related to our teaching, we should ask ourselves if any of our students will be disenfranchised by our choices. For example:

- If a student with a documented processing issue retreats during a graded in-class debate while other students find the fast pace exciting, is the student's participation grade lowered on this activity? Are they provided an opportunity to improve their grade through a differently formatted assignment?
- If a classroom simulation requires students to be assigned roles that symbolize underrepresented populations, are these roles assigned randomly or is there careful consideration as to the roles

assigned to students of color, religious minorities, women, and first-generation students in your classes?

- If American English idioms such as, “thinking outside the box,” or “hitting the nail on the head,” are used in a lecture, class discussion, or assigned reading or film, are you making sure to define them so that students who are not first language English speakers can equitably understand the material?

One important question we need to ask ourselves is: *As professors, are we viewing the success of our students as central to the success of our own teaching?*

A welcoming and structured learning environment

Undergraduate students thrive in a structured classroom environment where the syllabus, assignments, and grading mechanisms are driven by clear learning objectives. As faculty, we need to ensure that our teaching methodology, assigned texts and film resources, and assessments are all universally designed with the diversity of our learners in mind. We should not view this scaffolding as hand-holding, but instead as an element of inclusion in our teaching practices. Students who are most at need benefit disproportionately from structure, and those who do not require as much structure are not harmed by its presence in our teaching.

Inclusive environments also welcome all who enter our physical and virtual learning environments, including the teaching assistants, faculty members, guest speakers, and perspective-students who might be visiting. The audio/visual technicians who set up and fix the technology in our classrooms and the staff who clean our spaces should be included in this welcoming environment as well. As faculty members, we are responsible for modeling and normalizing an open and respectful environment for our students.

Important characteristics of inclusive teaching

There are shared characteristics that can be seen across inclusive college classrooms, regardless of the subject matter being taught. These elements include teaching speaking and listening skills, interrupting offensive language and faulty assumptions made by students in class, taking time to connect with students on a personal level, and being willing to pivot in our teaching methods if we find they are not working for our students. Although this list is in no way exhaustive, here are five important elements of inclusive teaching:

Listening deeply when others speak

We should be teaching our students what active listening means in the classroom. College students who listen thoughtfully to their peers can strengthen relationships and friendships. They can also grow to appreciate how their classmates might approach the course material differently than they do. Students who are trained to listen to their classmates create a place where people feel safe to share their opinions and offer suggestions in an environment built on trust.

As instructors, we should model thoughtful listening for our students. We should explain that one of the greatest barriers to communication is listening to reply, rather than listening to understand. Encouraging listening skills in class is not always an easy task. It takes effort for our college students to quiet their own

thoughts in order to really hear what others are saying. If we add structure to our teaching by not allowing students to raise their hands when a classmate is speaking, for example, we are taking steps toward inclusive listening behavior. It's important to remind our students of the appreciation and respect we all feel when we are heard without distractions.

Identifying needed improvements in our teaching

Regularly asking our students for feedback in writing and in person is important so that we can grow as educators and continue to make sure our classrooms are as inclusive as possible for all students. By finding out what activities and teaching methods work best for the students in our class, you'll be able to increase student engagement for many different kinds of learners. For example, a mistake many faculty members make is to routinely lecture through an entire class meeting. The intent is a positive one: after all, isn't it our job to cover as much detailed material as possible in the limited time we have with our students? If we receive feedback from our students about our classes being too lecture-heavy, perhaps we should be questioning our techniques: how will our students really understand the material if all they have done is listen?

Most typically, instructor evaluations are distributed at the end of the semester, leaving little room for improvement in our teaching. By asking students for regular feedback throughout the semester, we'll be able to troubleshoot methods that are not working for all learners and create activities and assignments that are more inclusive. Grades and test scores don't tell the whole story of a student's success in our courses; by asking our student how well our teaching fits their abilities as learners, we can continue to adjust our instruction to better meet student needs.

Respecting silence

Silence is critical, both as a teaching technique and as a mechanism to help students process new information and gather their individual thoughts and opinions. Some students are more focused on actively participating in class discussions than they are in listening to others. In addition, quieter students might prematurely accept the ideas of their more extraverted peers before considering their own. An inclusive classroom uses purposeful silence to benefit all students.

Professors are sometimes concerned about "wasting" precious class time in silence. Others feel that even a few minutes of silence in a classroom feels like an uncomfortable eternity. But short silences, especially following the presentation of difficult material, or after a heated class discussion is a tool used by many seasoned educators. Simply stating, "*Let's take two minutes to think or write silently, and then we'll break into small discussion groups/return to the larger class discussion*" will most often generate richer dialogue.

Recognizing the humanity in others

Taking time to connect with our students on a personal and emotional level will show them that they are valued and worthy. To the extent we are comfortable, it's important that we share both challenging and joyous stories from our own lives with them. We should feel comfortable letting our students know what is important to us, both inside and outside the classroom.

Using students' chosen names (pronounced correctly) and preferred pronouns; acknowledging stressful times in their lives, on campus, or in the larger society; asking how they are feeling after they have been ill; and sending a quick note to express concern if their behavior in class seems "off" are all crucial to building trusting,

caring relationships. Modeling the concern we show to our students should, in turn, help them to see us as humans with responsibilities, passions, families, feelings, and emotions.

Speaking only your truth

There is a difference between speaking your truth and speaking the truth, and we should teach this distinction to our students. We should encourage our students to confidently share their own voices in class. It's our job as faculty members to remind our students to speak only for themselves, however, not for a larger group in which they are a member, and certainly not for others.

As professors, we should also model the importance of asking about the experiences of others rather than making assumptions about their lives. Hearing others' answers to the questions we pose (sometimes preceded by asking them if we may ask these questions), is the clearest and most honest way of learning about other individuals' thoughts, emotions, and lived experiences—in their own words.

Interrupting bias and discriminatory language in the classroom learning environment

Inclusive teaching includes holding ourselves and our students accountable for the words and the opinions they share. It also means teaching our students to hold themselves and their peers accountable and to apologize for their own hurtful speech. Both conflicts between individuals sharing dissenting opinions and the use of offensive language by a student are to be expected in our college classrooms. Although often uncomfortable, these incidents are an appropriate part of college-level learning. If we can manage these situations well, they can be excellent ways for students to grow.

Faculty self-reflection and education

It's important to ask ourselves why so many of us are uncomfortable in the presence of a person expressing a high level of emotional intensity in a classroom setting. As faculty, we want our students to be passionate and engaged, so what is it that scares us? When we hear a student say something that may be hurtful or discriminatory to a peer, to us, or to a specific group of people, what is our reaction? Facilitating inclusive classroom discussion means that we have thought through some of these possible classroom scenarios and have made a plan to address the situation at hand.

Inclusive classrooms also require faculty to educate ourselves on the classroom biases reported by the students across the university who feel marginalized on our particular campus. This includes microaggressions—verbal or behavioral indignities which communicate racial or ethnic antagonism, whether intentional or unintentional. We must remember that a learning environment which a student perceives as hostile can dramatically and negatively affect their ability to learn and thrive on campus.

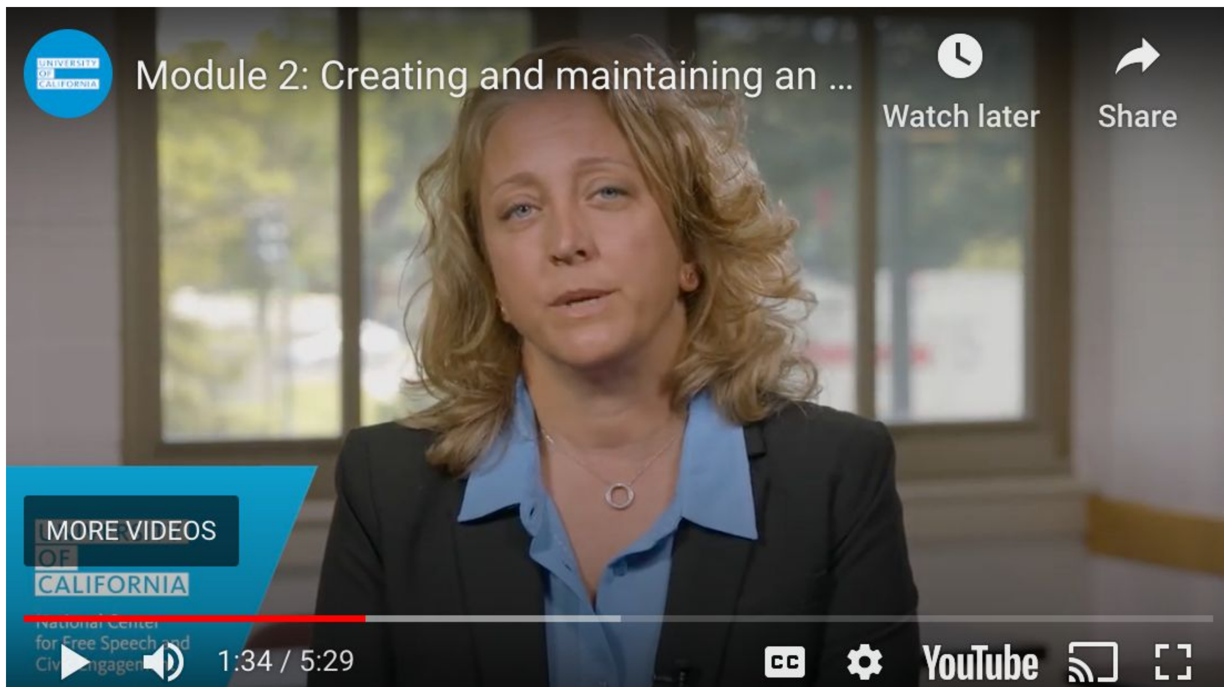
A step-by-step plan for interrupting bias

Do you have a plan to respond if a student in your class makes a sexist, racist, or homophobic remark? Are you ready to act quickly and provide a teachable moment so that communication does not shut down? These can be some of the most difficult and important teaching moments of a semester. Handle it wrong (or not at all)

and our authority in the class can be significantly compromised. Handle it appropriately, and we model an appropriate response in a profoundly meaningful manner.

Many colleges and universities have created guidelines for their instructors to interrupt bias when it arises in the classroom. Here is a user-friendly resource which can be applied in varied college classroom settings. It was created by the Office for Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives at Michigan State University in 2018 and adapted by many U.S. colleges and universities.

- **Quickly pause the conversation** after you have heard a biased, disturbing, or offensive word or comment from a student (with "wait a second" or "excuse me") to let the speaker know that you're interested in learning more about something they just said. Make sure to keep your focus on the student(s) who verbalized the offensive language. Most importantly, be willing to shift from your scheduled teaching plan for the sake of our students learning from the experience.
- **Ask the speaker(s) for clarification** (with, "what I hear you saying is") to let the speaker(s) know what you think you heard them say. This returns the power in the situation back to the student, offers them a minute to gather their thoughts, and gives them the floor to more clearly explain their language or what they meant to express, and perhaps offer an apology.
- **Listen carefully to their response in an engaged manner.** Give the speaker(s) an opportunity to correct your interpretation and/or apologize for the offensive language.Make sure to use eye contact, observe your body language, and interrupt the speaker only for further clarification.
- **Speak with confidence, describing your objection to what was said.** Explain why the language was offensive to you, with the goal or educating, not embarrassing the student(s). Within your comfort level, share your own experiences or learning related to the offensive term or biased opinion. Students are often moved to consider other perspectives when they hear the personal experiences of their professors and mentors.
- **Follow up** with the student or group who was offended or potentially offended. Reach out privately by conversation, email, or phone following the class. Ask for their opinion about the in-class experience and their interpretation as to how the interaction was handled. Offer the opportunity for further follow-up and confirm that they feel comfortable, included, and heard in your classroom environment.



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MODULE 3:
Setting community standards for learning

Community standards, sometimes referred to as classroom guidelines, serve as a collaborative framework for inclusive classroom learning. These guidelines encourage inclusive and productive dialogue in the learning environment. Unlike a classroom contract in a K-12 environment which imposes rules on students and punishes those who disobey, community standards for college learning require that the faculty member and the students in the course work collaboratively to design a living document for the benefit of all members.

Interactively producing these guidelines encourages college students to feel that they have a stake in their own learning. Once they are agreed upon and adopted, the community standards can become the framework for accountable classroom communication.

Learning objectives

1. Define community standards for learning and explain their importance
2. Appraise suggested community standard themes for universal use
3. Identify methods for creating, revising, and amending community standards for learning and customize by course delivery format

Community standards for learning and their importance in the college classroom

The community standards for learning form the framework of the class. Once adopted, they will be distributed to all students, referenced frequently, and amended when appropriate. The practice of creating the standards is just as important. If our students feel they are truly co-creators of their class community standards, not only will they be more inclined to follow them, but the guidelines can also significantly improve the tenor of our classroom discussions.

The practice of creating the standards encourages students to reach outside of their comfort zones to share opinions and engage in discourse across differences—skills they will practice throughout the term. The way that professors introduce the community standards activity sets the tone for communication in the class. The in-class activity of creating the community standards works best as a required but non-graded assignment. It is good practice to first engage students in a short discussion about some of their insecurities about the course (or about college in general if the class is composed of first-year students), and ask what communication challenges have arisen in their previous high school or college courses.

Classroom contracts help explain the power dynamics of learning environments
Most college students have learned about the stratified nature of the society in which they live, but fewer have been taught about how classroom spaces are highly stratified as well. It is often an eye-opening experience (especially for first-year college students) to be asked to think about college classrooms as hierarchical microcosms. Traditionally, the professor as the “sage on the stage” displays all the power from the front of the

room, imparting their knowledge to the seated students. In turn, the students furiously record the information being handed down and at some point are asked to relay that knowledge back.

In a less traditional classroom, educators can feel free to experiment with alternative ways of distributing power. The focus can be on equitability, inclusivity, and encouraging varied student voices. Working with students to set classroom community guidelines is a way for faculty to demonstrate to our students that their thoughts and suggestions are valuable to us and to the class as a whole. This activity is one of many ways students can have input in creating their own productive learning environments. Simultaneously,

Previous teaching mishaps and challenges benefit the generation of new ideas
So many semesters pass when we as faculty fail to learn from our own classroom challenges and teaching mishaps. Perhaps we are quick to put an unfavorable experience behind us, or maybe we don't realize the importance of learning from our classroom mistakes. However,after a class discussion that felt out of our control, or a class debate where students were treating each other disrespectfully, we should be asking ourselves what went wrong.

Many of our classroom challenges could have been avoided, or at least minimized, if we had community standards in place. For example, if there were guidelines for interrupting a student's biased language, would we or another student have used them to diffuse a situation that got out of control? If we had approached a student who spoke too frequently during class discussions early in the semester and reminded them of agreed-upon class guidelines for participation, would that student have been better connected to classmates? If students had helped to create policies for shared responsibility in group project work, would they have felt more empowered to approach a group member they felt wasn't pulling their weight in the assignment?

Suggested community standard themes for universal use

Rather than asking our students to begin brainstorming ideas during the in-class activity where students create community standards for learning, it is best to introduce a general list of themes that are important to us. In addition to saving significant classroom time, introducing the activity on community standards with some themes ready for discussion will be especially useful for first-year students unfamiliar with college-level speaking and listening expectations.

Themes that instructors suggest for inclusion in classroom community standards will vary based on the content of the course, our teaching style, and our course learning objectives. Reviewing our syllabi in advance of creating community standards with our students will ensure that we are taking into account the learning opportunities we have chosen for the course. For example, in a class with in-class debates where we anticipate opposing opinions will most likely be raised, we might want to suggest that students set guidelines related to these activities.

Five sample themes for community standards

Here are five suggested themes that will work to spark conversation about community standards in most discussion-based classes:

1. **Active listening:**
   When creating community standards for learning, the class should collectively decide how they will define active listening and how they will choose to encourage the practice. Perhaps standards will discourage students from raising their hands while others (both faculty and peers) are talking? Will there be rules for laptop and cellphone use during class discussions, and if so, how will they be enforced?

2. **All voices welcome to speak:**
   How will the class define "inclusive voices"? Will there be guidelines for balancing the participation of different speakers in the class? Will there be rules for how frequently students speak? How will the community ensure that students differentiate between facts and opinions? Will community members be required to defend their claims with verifiable evidence, and how will it be handled if they do not?

3. **A diverse and inclusive community:**
   How will the class define "diverse" and "inclusive" and how will they explain differences between the terms? Will the community standards for learning address ideas of how to respond to speech that is hurtful? Will students be expected to interrupt bias when they hear it, or is this the responsibility of the instructor? Will the class expect apologies from those who offend others? Must these apologies be accepted from class members who felt hurt or wronged?

4. **Confidentiality and community:**
   Will the group set guidelines about confidentiality? If so, how will they be enforced? May personal stories that have been shared in class be repeated to others outside of class? If so, will there be rules about anonymity? How will the same rules about confidentiality apply to social media? How will rule-breaking be addressed?

5. **Student Responsibility:**
   What responsibility and commitment will students have to the class readings, individual assignments, and due dates? Are there particular rules for group projects? How will it be handled if a student is not pulling their weight in a collaborative assignment? How will community members be responsible for presenting their concerns about specific academic course material or the class environment?

Creating community standards and the impact of course delivery format

When planning for creating community standards, it is important to consider the manner in which the particular class will be taught: in person or online, synchronous, asynchronous, or a hybrid model. The delivery of the course will influence how the group will actually gather to create the community standards, how the guidelines will be edited, and what the themes of the document itself will be. For example, community standards for participating in class discussions will look quite different for in-person versus online classes.

Students' deep sighs of frustration or shifting in seats, easy to spot in classrooms taught in person, provide a lot of information for instructors; they are tell-tale signs of student discomfort with the material or opinions being presented. Given the difficulty of reading the gestures or body language of our students over video conferencing , it could be argued that community standards for learning might be even more important in classes taught online . If there is the possibility that a class might change from in-person to virtual over the course of the semester, or if students will be attending the class in different formats, the course community standards should reflect this to remain inclusive of all students.

Collecting ideas as a class

There are many different methods for collecting student ideas to create classroom community standards for learning. Suggestions can be recorded by hand on a blackboard, white board, or large Post-it and then photographed to be transcribed later. They can be created in a Google Doc that can be reworked as the ideas are tweaked and later edited by all. Teaching assistants can take the lead in both facilitating the collection of ideas and in further editing the document.

If the class size prohibits creating the document as a full group, breaking the class into small working groups to tackle the language of specific standards and report back to the entire class is a great option. This method also works well in a class being taught in a hybrid format. Students who are meeting in person can work together to brainstorm ideas and create guidelines while students taking the class virtually can be assigned collaborative work on creating select community standards by video chat. Regardless of how ideas for community standards are collected, the timing for the completion of the document is critical. The standards should be in place within the first two weeks of the semester in order to set the tone for the teaching and learning ahead.

Revising and amending the document

Once the community standards document is in a draft format, it can be edited and refined by all members of the classroom community. If the revising and editing takes place during another scheduled class time, it's important to set that time aside so that the working session will not be rushed. One way to approach the exercise is to ask the students to take a few minutes to read specific community standards you have assigned to them and suggest wording that they want to change, remove, or add.

You can then pair students up with a classmate to discuss the edits each student wants to propose. Using a shared laptop or a document in hard copy, the partners can work together to further edit the specific community standards they have been assigned. After a set amount of time, each pair can report their additional proposed edits back to the class.

Once all suggestions have been incorporated, the entire revised document should be distributed to the class. Since all students should feel that the community guidelines accurately represent their interests and are principles by which they are willing to abide, you might consider giving them a few days to offer final feedback. A date that your class community standards for learning will be "ratified" should be clearly delineated on your syllabus.

Professors should promote an understanding that the classroom community standards are a living document that can (and should) be amended as specific situations arise and as the students in the course grow to know each other as classmates and colleagues. Addressing the need to amend collaboratively created community standards should be presented as the responsibility of all classroom members. In fact, amending the standards can become the framework for accountable classroom communication.

Distributing and displaying the community standards for learning

After they are finalized, the community standards can be distributed to students virtually or in hard copy. The benefit of having them distributed virtually is the ease with which they can be amended at any point in the semester and immediately be accessible to students. If the faculty member and teaching assistant regularly reference the standards, they model how the guidelines are embedded in the learning environment.

Some professors choose to add the community standards to their class syllabus on the school's online learning platform. Others carry them to class on a poster and hang them at the front of the classroom for the entire semester—others just for the first few weeks. Still other instructors ask students to read some or all of the community guidelines aloud occasionally as a reminder to the group that they have set a collective agreement. Distributing and displaying agreed-upon guidelines in an accessible location is crucial for students to understand their impact on the class and how seriously the community standards are expected to be followed by the learning community.

Sample Community Standards for Learning:

- **Respect**—Give undivided attention to the person who has the floor (permission to speak).
- **Openness**—We will be as open and honest as possible without disclosing others' personal or private issues (e.g., family, roommates, friends). It is okay to discuss situations, but we won't use names or other identifiers. For example, we won't say, "My older brother…", instead we will say, "I know someone who…".
- **Right to pass**—It is always okay to pass (meaning "I'd rather not" or "I don't want to answer").
- Nonjudgmental approach—We can disagree with another person's point of view without putting that person down.
- **Taking care to claim our opinions**—We will speak our opinions using the first person and avoid using 'you'. For example, "I think that kindness is important", instead of "You are just mean".
- **Sensitivity to diversity**—We will remember that people in the group may differ in cultural background, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity or gender expression and will be careful about making insensitive or careless remarks.
- **Anonymity**—It is okay to ask any question by using the suggestion box.
- **Acceptance**—It is okay to feel uncomfortable; people feel uncomfortable when they talk about sensitive and personal topics, such as sexuality.
- **Have a good time**—It is okay to have a good time. Creating a safe space is about coming together as a community, being mutually supportive, and enjoying each other's qualities.

- **Respect each other's personal space**—Ask for consent before touching another person, ensure that you are giving people their desired space.

Teaching Assistants' Training Program, University of Toronto, 2020

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MODULE 4:
Assessments and assignments for collaboration and productive dialogue

As campuses and communities seek tools for addressing political polarization and division, we are often asked to provide advice and training about how to encourage "civil debate" among students. But civil debate is another way of saying "fighting politely." Although fighting politely is preferable to fighting with malice, it is not necessarily more likely to serve course learning objectives or foster understanding across difference. A paradigm shift from combat (gentle or otherwise) to collaboration makes our courses fertile ground for communication and robust inquiry.

Much has been written about the value of collaborative learning—from building relationships among students, to preparing them for the workforce where teamwork is often required. But instructors and students alike can have concerns about group work—particularly how to assess it.

This module provides ideas for building collaborative work and mindset into a course, designing projects and assessments that involve dialogue across difference and assessing group work.

Learning objectives

1. Learn to build collaborative learning into the fabric of a course
2. Collaborative assessments and presentations
3. Define successful collaborative work and build methods of assessing it

Build collaborative learning into the fabric of a course

Collaboration—much like active engagement in a course—is something that professors often want to encourage and assess but do not always define. Students arrive at college suspicious about group work. Many report bad experiences where they felt they had to carry the burden for an entire group. And those of us who assign collaborative projects know there's another side to that story too—that for every student who *had* to do all of the work, there is one who felt boxed out of the decision-making process and gave up. Collaboration is a skill worth knowing, but we need to define it, model it, and teach it—not just assign one group project and hope all goes well.

The following are some ways to build collaboration and listening into the fabric of the course, even outside of assessed collaborative projects:

Take time for students to introduce themselves
Don't skimp on introductions. In a hybrid or online course, ask students to share something about themselves on the LMS. Professors can lead the way by sharing something about themselves. Remember that students are

in several classes and will not take the time to learn everyone's name unless they understand that this is a priority.

It can be worthwhile to create stable small groups for discussion exercises—particularly in hybrid or online classes. That way, students are sure to become familiar with a subset of their class. Remind students to state their names at the beginning of small group breakout discussions and when they volunteer to speak, at least for the first few weeks of the class.

Include problem-solving exercises in class discussions
Problem-solving exercises give students a common purpose. They shift class engagement from "I" to "we," helping students get to know one another's competencies and skills.

Some guidelines for problem-solving exercises:

- Remind students that the goal is inquiry, not debate. They should spend time determining what they would need to know and what research they would have to conduct in order to answer the question well. This exercise also builds basic research design skills
- Avoid yes/no questions (e.g., should police unions be abolished) in favor of open-ended questions (e.g. what steps might we take to ensure police were held accountable for misconduct)
- Ask students to identify their points of agreement, including their shared goals
- Remind students to look to course readings and concepts in their discussions and to cite sources much like they would in a paper
- Ask for a final product: this can be a list of relevant research questions; a set of course readings or concepts that inform their problem solving, or a proposed answer. Have small groups share what they come up with on the LMS discussion board or share back in class.

Peer critique and editing
Students can also collaborate by reviewing one another's work, consistent with academic integrity codes. If we choose to have students offer feedback on one another's works in progress, we must remember that it's important for students to understand our assignments and expectations thoroughly, and assign students the very specific task of helping their peers evaluate the extent to which their drafts or proposed theses meet the assignment standards.

Provide a rubric or checklist that reflects goals for the assignment and the standards by which it will be assessed

- Have a classroom or discussion board dialogue where students can ask questions about the assignment
- Offer students a clear mandate as peer reviewers, such as:

- Helping a peer clarify their thesis statement
- Brainstorming course readings and concepts the peer could use to support their claim
- Identifying potential opposing arguments their classmate should address in the paper

Collaborative assessments and presentations that emphasize collaborative process and communication across difference

The typical group project assignment asks students to solve some problem together and present it to their peers. The following are tools for maximizing the power of these group assessments to foster communication with peers and value collaborative processes

Incorporate a hypothetical audience into the problem-solving assignment and have students assume the role of that audience

Considering diverse perspectives is a foundation of productive dialogue across difference. And as every writer and writing instructor knows, understanding one's audience is a foundational writing skill. Adding a target audience to group projects and presentations helps the presenting students and their student audience build both skills.

Examples of specific target audiences for student presentations:

- Business owners
- Faith leaders
- Voters in a state that is unlike theirs (ex: a red, blue, rural, diverse)
- The university's board of trustees
- Union members
- A segment of voters such as suburban parents
- Gun owners or hunters
- Homeowners

Ask students who will watch the presentation to play the role of that audience and ask questions from that perspective.

Consider a dialogue across difference assignment

Problem-solving exercises are enormously useful. Outside of school, however, often difference is intractable (and without an assignment to reach consensus by a certain date, lawmakers and community members let problems go unsolved for a very long time). Students can benefit from exploring the nature of their disagreement and present their findings.

This is the "dialogue across difference" assignment prompt from a government course:

> Sign up to work with a partner to explore a policy proposal about which you disagree. Your mission is to explore your understanding of the topic, tracking and documenting what you discuss. It is not necessary to reach a common-ground solution; you may explore and explain the nature of your disagreement.
>
> **The partners should engage in the following inquiry:**
>
> - Identify what you agree you need to know
>   - in order to be fully educated about the issue (ex- what do you need to know about bail reform?)
>   - in order to fully comprehend your partner's position (ex- what aspects of my partner's experience, such as military service, faith, or identity, might inform her preferences about bail reform?)
> - Identify what you do not agree is relevant (ex- Sparkie doesn't believe cost is a relevant factor to consider in establishing alternatives to imprisonment; Penelope believes it is relevant);
> - Identify shared values and interests (ex- we both want to eliminate racial bias in criminal justice);
> - Identify goals that diverge (ex- only one of us wants to move toward abolishing incarceration);
> - Be able to articulate each other's initial positions and concerns in a way that makes the other person feel heard;
> - Collaborate on a presentation that explains the challenges of working across disagreement when it comes to this issue and offers advice to policymakers about how to work across difference on this topic. Remember to include course concepts and readings in your exploration.

We as professors can apply the same assessment standards to this project as any other group project. The partners should treat their statements as primary source documents or interviews, and refer to them specifically (ex: "Michelle said her school was almost all white") rather than using blanket characterizations ("as a rural American Michelle doesn't have experience with diversity").

Defining success in collaborative work

If we are assigning group work to foster collaboration and communication, we should assess those objectives, and not only the final product. Self-assessment and peer assessment can all contribute (and ensure that all members of a group are equally accountable for completing the assignment).

Online LMS grading platforms enable us to create rubrics that incorporate any criteria we choose. For a group project, we suggest grading the overall work product and presentation for the group as a whole, and grading collaboration separately. To do so, have all students complete a quiz on the LMS that includes questions such as: did you complete all of your assigned tasks in a timely fashion? Would your group members want to work with you again? Why? Would you want to work with this group again? Why? Give students an opportunity to describe the group dynamic in detail.

It's important to let students know at the beginning of the semester that they will be graded both on what they submit and on their performance as a colleague, as described by themselves and others. It is also helpful to let all groups and individuals know that if there is any concern about a group member, or if they have a barrier to participating fully themselves, they should communicate with faculty or a teaching assistant as soon as possible.

This mode of assessment does take some extra time. When we grade group projects, we need to look at all members' LMS quiz entries before assigning a grade to any individual. The process has rewards, however. It helps us learn more about students' learning process (including what modalities of communication and planning work for them), avoid penalizing students for peers' negligence, and recognize and reward effective collaboration. These reflections can also be extremely useful for faculty who are writing recommendation letters.

Next steps

Review the syllabus and identify opportunities to build collaboration into the fabric. Consider adding introductions—whether in person or on the discussion board. Look for class sessions that would benefit from collaborative problem-solving exercises. Consider dedicating class time to peer discussion of papers and projects in progress.

Collaborative assessments require a grading rubric that includes collaboration. This should be explicit in the syllabus, prompt, and communications with students.

Resources

Sample collaborative project rubric (Blackboard):

Rubric Detail

Select Grid View or List View to change the rubric's layout. More Help

Name: **Group project**

Description: **This will be how your group project is scored.**

Exit

Grid View | List View

	Novice	Competent	Proficient	Good	Very good	Excellent	Superior
Organization and presentation	2.625 (10.50%)	2.8125 (11.25%)	3 (12.00%)	3.1875 (12.75%)	3.375 (13.50%)	3.5625 (14.25%)	3.75 (15.00%)
Supports solution with evidence it will work	5.25 (21.00%)	5.625 (22.50%)	6 (24.00%)	6.375 (25.50%)	6.75 (27.00%)	7.125 (28.50%)	7.5 (30.00%)
Higher-order thinking	6.125 (24.50%)	6.5625 (26.25%)	7 (28.00%)	7.4375 (29.75%)	7.875 (31.50%)	8.3125 (33.25%)	8.75 (35.00%)
Colleague rating	3.5 (14.00%)	3.75 (15.00%)	4 (16.00%)	4.25 (17.00%)	4.5 (18.00%)	4.75 (19.00%)	5 (20.00%)

Name: **Group project**

Description: **This will be how your group project is scored.**

Exit

Two tools for peer critique: A writing checklist and guide to editing.