

Three Steps to Civil Discourse



It is difficult to keep a cool head when discussing a heated topic, but respectful dialogues are the key to reaching mutual understanding. Civil discourse involves conversations in which there is a mutual airing of views without rancor. It is not a contest; it is intended to promote greater understanding. Here are three simple ways to help members of your campus community engage in productive, civil discourse.

1

BEGIN WITH YOURSELF.

Modeling is the best way to teach civil discourse and related positive values you want other people to emulate. Preparing to be an effective role model might require a bit of honest soul-searching. **Here are some thoughts to consider:**

- Can you remain calm when other people say things you dislike?
- Can you comfortably accept when others reach different conclusions on a controversial issue than you might have reached?
- Do you become emotional when you're having a hard time explaining why you think another person's views are wrong?
- Have you ever lashed out at another person during an argument?

If you struggle in any of these situations, imagine how difficult it is for others to handle themselves in a contentious discussion.

To foster civil dialogues, you must make a firm philosophical commitment to the process. The goal is not to make others reach any particular conclusions about a certain topic; the goal is to practice the skill of thinking and speaking about a variety of different views while behaving respectfully towards one another. A successful dialogue need not result in opinions being

changed, but hopefully it will cause others to consider fresh perspectives and realize that issues that seemed black-and-white may be more complex than they had previously thought.

The attitude required to facilitate civil dialogue is similar to what psychologist Carl Rogers calls “unconditional acceptance.” Members of your campus community must know that you are on their side (even if you don’t always agree with them). They must believe that all views are welcome for discussion, and that you will protect them from personal attacks or humiliation if they “put themselves out there.” Unconditional acceptance means creating an environment where people are safe to be who they actually are and to say what they honestly think, without fear of facing ridicule, hostility, or harsh treatment. Unconditional acceptance also creates the conditions in which a person with rigid and extreme views could become willing to hear opposing viewpoints in a nonjudgmental, receptive attitude of openness.

Remember: The process of civil discourse is more important than the product (reaching the “right” conclusion). If members of your campus community express and listen to a variety of views on a controversial topic, and they do so civilly, then the discourse is successful, regardless of any intellectual conclusion reached.

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MANAGE AND MONITOR THE CONVERSATION CLIMATE.

To foster a civil dialogue, the climate must be “temperate.” This means it cannot be too “hot” or too “cold.” A “hot” climate leads to overly heated discussions, where students lose their tempers and become emotional, rather than rational. This can lead to personal attacks that are unproductive, disruptive, and hurtful. On the other hand, a climate that is too “cool” can be too “chilly” for timid students to risk expressing unpopular or minority views. In this case, everyone will stick to mouthing safe platitudes with the hope of pleasing the group.

State your dialogue expectations clearly from the start. You will need to set clear discussion boundaries and then maintain them. This may require some discussion, but it is imperative that everyone knows the rules and can agree to adhere to them. Firm boundaries will make everyone feel safe and protected in a passionate dialogue. Unclear or shifting boundaries will leave everyone feeling guarded, uncomfortable, and anxious — including you!

Once you have determined and stated your conversation rules, you must commit to policing and enforcing them. People will be watching very carefully

to see if you mean what you say and they will test you to determine if the stated boundaries are going to be enforced. It is up to you to safeguard the environment so that civil dialogue can proceed on important topics worthy of discussion. Creating a supportive and safe environment means being vigilant and prepared to step in decisively when needed. People have to trust you and your ability to keep the environment safe for them to express themselves authentically before they will risk opening up and saying anything disputable.

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START SMALL AND BUILD AS SKILLS DEVELOP.

Like any other skill, the ability to engage in civil discourse requires practice. Don't expect people to get it right the first time, and don't expect them to be able to start with highly controversial topics right off the bat.

It is best to begin with activities that don't feel personally threatening to individual students. This would be a topic students are unlikely to take personally. Check out FIRE's Topic Escalation guide for guidance on starting your conversation.

Watch Civil Debates

One good way to start is by having participants watch other people debate contentious topics in a peaceful fashion. This is an effective way of modeling the kind of discourse you are trying to promote. (Check out FIRE's [Free to Disagree debate series](#), [Intelligence Squared](#), or the [Oxford Union](#).)

Silent, Private Journaling

Another strategy is to present a debatable statement and have participants either agree, strongly agree, disagree or strongly disagree, and state why they have chosen this position. This could be done through silent journaling at first, to give people emotional space to contemplate their views. It can be challenging for people to "think out loud" in a pressured situation, so this activity can start to familiarize participants with the practice of taking a position and defending it. If you want to move this activity to the next level, after people have stated which views they agree with, assign them the opposite view to defend. Some people may find this mildly threatening and fairly challenging, so be ready to provide plenty of support.

Take Public Positions

When people are accustomed to silent journaling, you could introduce an activity where the show of agreement or disagreement is public, either by a show of hands or by participants arranging themselves in different locations in the room according to viewpoint. This could lead to a sharing of views and possible changing of minds, as people listen to different opinions.

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