Civil Discourse at Park Tudor

In our ongoing mission to promote our foundational values of intellectual engagement, respect and responsibility, we believe in the importance of sharing a framework for civil discourse that can complement work already underway or serve as a starting point. The attached glossary and primer are intended to foster continued positive engagement both in and out of the classroom.

GLOSSARY

CIVIL DISCOURSE: A conversation in which there is a mutual airing of views without rancor; not a contest, but it is intended to promote greater understanding.

THOUGHTFUL SILENCE: Whether it is used when a teacher slows down his or her speech to emphasize a point, or after asking a question, or even after a student has responded to a question, silence can be invaluable. It creates space for thought and sends students the message that we trust them as thoughtful learners who need time to reflect.

REFLECTIVE CLASSROOM: A place where explicit rules and implicit norms protect everyone's right to speak; where different perspectives can be heard and valued; where members take responsibility for themselves, each other, and the group as a whole; and where each member has a stake and a voice in collective decisions.

EMPATHY: The ability to understand and or share the feelings of another.

NAME CALLING: The use of abusive names to belittle or humiliate a person in an argument or discussion.

ACTIVE LISTENING: A process of listening attentively while someone else speaks, paraphrasing and reflecting back what is said, and withholding judgment and advice.

PROSOCIAL CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT: An environment focused on the wellbeing of others in which faculty model the communication skills that they want their students to follow during class discussions and in small group exercises.

CLASS NORMS: the behavioral expectations or rules of the class; class norms inform us how we are expected to behave towards each other and towards the materials we use.

Promoting Civil Discourse

What is Civil Discourse and why is it important in classrooms?

According to *Teaching Tolerance,* a Southern Poverty Law Center project, civil discourse is "productive, reasoned and lively discussions on a variety of topics." Civil discourse includes impassioned discussion, but does not include personal attacks. Civil discourse in the classroom environment enables learning and critical thinking to flourish in a respectful manner. Such verbal interchange requires faculty and students alike to become self-reflective and to examine their own assumptions and potential biases about values and respect. Challenges to civil discourse can arise from multiple sources both within and outside of the classroom and Park Tudor environment. When thinking about civil discourse, we might ask ourselves

- What are its primary characteristics?
- What behaviors does it exclude?
- Does it look different depending on context, such as in personal relationships versus professional, in interactions with customer service representatives versus friends, or in classrooms versus other community spaces?
- What may cause any of us to become uncivil?

Being equipped with a better understanding of our own perspectives can enable us to better engage in and promote civil discourse with our students and colleagues.

General Attitudes and Approaches

Creating an environment that emphasizes community norms for discourse is vital for facilitating meaningful conversations and civil discourse. Building your classroom as a community embraces but goes beyond goals for diversity and inclusion. It speaks to a common goal in an academic environment, acknowledging differences of opinion and creating space for difficult conversations on sensitive topics. It supports intellectual engagement and multiple perspectives, and it speaks to respect and mutual agreement that all voices have value. When students view their peers as part of a community, they are more likely to care about the ways in which they communicate and challenge alternative perspectives.

Such a classroom creates a pro-social environment, one in which faculty model the communication skills that they want their students to follow during class discussions and in small group exercises. It is an environment in which

- Students can ask questions without fear of ridicule, and can make and learn from their mistakes;

- Faculty encourage students to brainstorm new approaches to problems and acknowledge students' diversity of thought, opinions, and ideas;
- Both faculty and students are sensitive to the likelihood of having their own biases and preferences, but don't impose them on each other;
- Students are encouraged to allow space for all voices to be heard, especially when working in small groups or on group assignments;
- Faculty are clear in their directions and feedback, and avoid sarcasm and innuendo in their responses to student questions or concerns;
- Faculty help students learn how to respectfully disagree with another's point of view without blame or recrimination.

Building a Classroom Community

The first step is to define a set of discussion norms. It is important to emphasize that these norms apply both in and out of the classroom setting, but it is the classroom where we can begin to formulate best practices. As a baseline, here are communication norms to promote civil discourse:

- Engage in active listening, and do not interrupt other speakers;
- Allow space for all voices, rather than a few, to join in the conversation;
- Apologize in cases where someone is unintentionally offended;
- Be willing to examine and challenge one's beliefs and grow intellectually;
- Critique or challenge ideas, but not individuals;
- Refrain from expecting one person to represent an entire social group, class, race, or gender; make "I" statements, rather than broad generalizations;
- Define behaviors that will not be accepted, including eye rolling, name calling, and laughing at mistakes.

Naturally, each classroom is different, so there is freedom to add other processes that undergird class discussions in addition to the aforementioned baseline norms, such as:
- Brainstorm and generate a list on the board of ways in which students can exchange ideas respectfully during class discussion;
- Define specific terms on the list to be sure students understand their meanings;
- Faculty may add to students' list if items are missing;
- As a group, students edit the list and provide examples as needed.

In the final stages, the class reaches an agreement to accept the list and to abide by the class norms for academic discourse, and the class norms are distributed to students.

Adapted from: American University, Center for Teaching, Research and Learning, "Promoting Civil Discourse in Troubled Times".