



Harpeth Hall

Difficult Dialogues Toolkit for Students

Guidelines for Difficult Dialogues

- I. Make sure that your opinions and beliefs are supported by accurate information from reliable sources. **Fact check before you share!!**
- II. It is important to keep in mind that when you argue against someone's deeply held convictions, you are often asking them to reconsider the values that form the foundation of their world view. Be aware that these conversations are going to be sensitive and difficult.
- III. Discussions of controversial topics will often be conducted in the form of a **deliberation** not a debate. In a deliberation, everyone expects to end up in a different place as a result of the discussion. In other words, you might end up with a slightly modified opinion, a stronger opinion, or a completely different opinion. Or you might emerge from the discussion with a much deeper understanding of multiple perspectives. You will be expected to contribute your knowledge and perspective to the group, listen to one another and build on the comments of your classmates. **While debate is competitive and the goal is to "win," deliberation is a collaborative process that seeks to share and examine ideas.**

During the deliberation:

- I. **Keep your emotions in check.** Being passionate about your beliefs is important, but you are not likely to make meaningful progress if you allow a discussion to be hijacked by angry outbursts or personal attacks.
- II. **Seek FIRST to understand.** Persuasion is an important skill, but your ability to persuade is greatly diminished if you do not understand the issue at hand or cannot accurately articulate opposing points of view. Use the **"looping technique!"** Ask a friend who holds a different perspective on an issue to explain it to you. When she is finished, articulate her position back to her so that she may correct anything you did not understand. Flip roles and do the looping activity again as you explain your point of view to your friend and she articulates it back to you.
- III. Use active listening techniques and be aware of your body language. Try to really understand what others are saying, especially if their ideas are different from your own. Avoid building arguments in your head while someone else is talking.
- IV. Be willing to "agree to disagree." Speak your mind freely but do not monopolize the conversation.
- V. In order to separate an issue from the emotions involved, think of the idea being discussed as a "third person" in the room. **Focus on the argument itself, not on the person making the argument.** Consider the structure of the argument, underlying assumptions, factual support, and the use of logic.
- VI. Verbally confirm that what you heard your classmate say is accurate. For example, paraphrase the point and ask, "Did I understand you correctly?" Or ask for clarification, "Could you explain what you mean by _____?"



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- VII. **Try to use language that communicates empathy**, “You seem to be upset about this issue. Why is that?” “I want to understand your position, could you tell me more about _____?” (remember that understanding a position does not mean you support or agree with it).
- VIII. If you feel yourself getting angry, disengage from the conversation and take a few slow, deep breaths before continuing! Or you can disengage from the discussion and return to it at a later time when the issue can be discussed more rationally.
- IX. If you are uncomfortable or upset about anything that transpired during a classroom discussion, talk to your teacher after class or set up a time to talk about it.
- X. Remember that, even when these deliberations become tense, working through these “hot moments” can provide opportunities for deeper understanding and growth.

Resources:

The guidelines and strategies provided in this document have been adapted and compiled from the following resources:

CATO Institute Sphere Summit, July 2019, Washington, D.C. <https://www.cato.org/sphere-summit-2019/schedule>

“Difficult Dialogues.” Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/>

“Facilitating Challenging Conversations in the Classroom,” The Teaching Center, Washington University in St. Louis. <https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/inclusive-teaching-learning/facilitating-challenging-conversations-in-the-classroom/>

“Guidelines for Deliberation,” The Choices Program. Brown University. <http://www.choices.edu/resources/guidelines.php>

“Guidelines for Planning and Facilitating Discussions on Controversial Topics,” Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. University of Michigan. <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines>

“Teaching Tolerance,” The Southern Poverty Law Center. <https://www.tolerance.org/about/partners>

Warren, Lee. “Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom.” The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University. <https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/managing-hot-moments-classroom>