Facilitating Discussions about Controversial Topics:
A Guide for Faculty

Nancy Chick, 2025

Contents

FACULTY COMMONS
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

Preparing Yourself

Take Care of Yourself

Know yourself, including your biases, what pushes your buttons, and what might cause you to fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.

Plan what you'll do if any of these situations arise, so you're not surprised or caught off guard.

- What or who you need to prepare for the discussion?
- Do you need to brainstorm or role play with a colleague?
- How can you tend to yourself or plan some support following the discussion?

> "The fight response is your body's way of facing any perceived threat aggressively. Flight means your body urges you to run from danger. Freeze is your body's inability to move or act against a threat. Fawn is your body's stress response to try to please someone to avoid conflict" (Taylor 2024).

Interpret Generously

Plan to be generous during the discussion by remembering that you are the educator, and the students are the learners. A generous approach to the discussion includes recognizing that learners stumble. Students can appear to resist or regress when dealing with difficult topics, complexity, elevated emotions, or understandings beyond their reach. This *apparent* resistance or regression may be what you see, but the internal response may be neither.

Privately, students may be experiencing discomfort with talking in class, fear of the unknown, poor self-image as a learner, not recognizing the relevance of the activity, not understanding the topic enough to participate, or some other feeling that isn't obvious in the behaviors you see.

Expect and plan for these responses as part of learning.

Pre-imagine the Discussion, Including What Might Go Wrong

An effective way to prepare for this discussion is to do a premortem, a planning exercise in which you imagine failure and then plan away from that failure. The steps of a premortem are below:

1. List everything that could go wrong in your discussion (e.g., heated exchanges, disengagement).
2. Get specific: what's the nature of these heated exchanges? Why might students disengage? What's the worst that could happen?
3. Identify strategies to prevent these problems.
4. Develop specific responses and interventions in case these problems do occur.

The section below offers a variety of scripts that can help you with #3 and 4.

Develop Specific Prompts & Scripts

Prepare a set of prompts and scripts to guide discussions and address potential challenges. Having these ready before the discussion will help you navigate challenging moments more smoothly. A few examples are below.

> → **Tip:** Generative AI tools like Gemini can help you a) identify how students might respond and then b) help you write potential questions or scripts to keep in your pocket. I used ChatGPT 5.0 and Claude to help me with a few of the scripts below.

Encourage active listening

- "Before you respond, try summarizing what you heard the other person say. This helps ensure we're all understanding each other accurately."

Connect to course content

- "Let's consider how this relates to [course concept/reading]. How does [author/theory] help us understand different perspectives on this topic?"

Verify and encourage self-reflection
- "Tell me more about..."
- "This is what I heard you say... is it what you meant?"
- "Can you say that in another way?"
- "What led you to this point of view?"
- "I notice your passion about this issue: What makes this so important for you?"
- "If what you're proposing came to pass, how would things be different?"

Encourage meta-level reflection
- "Let's challenge ourselves to differentiate between our opinions and informed knowledge. What evidence supports our views? How might our personal experiences or social positions influence our perspectives?"
- "Let's take a step back and review what led up to this point. What are the different perspectives we're seeing? How might we bridge these differences?"

Explore silence or hesitance
- "What makes this hard to discuss?"
- "What needs to be clarified at this point?"
- "What's running through your minds about what you're hearing?"

Depersonalize by shifting focus away from a student to an issue
- "Many people think this way. Why do they hold such views? What are their reasons?" and then, "Why do those who disagree hold other views?"
- "Let's examine this idea more broadly. How does this perspective relate to the larger issues we've been discussing?"

Introduce an alternative view, or redirect away from a dominant speaker
- "I'd like to offer another point of view…"
- "I'd like to hear a different perspective…"

Redirect to relevant topic
- "This is an important point, but let's return to our main issue. How does this relate to the key issues we identified at the beginning of our discussion?"

Use writing exercises
- "Let's take a few minutes to write down our thoughts about what's been said. This will give us all a chance to reflect before we continue our discussion."

Preparing Your Course
Identify Your Goals for the Discussion
As you plan a discussion about a controversial topic, identify your goals or how you would describe its purpose.

Guiding Questions
- Why are you planning a discussion about *this* topic in *this* course?
- How does it connect to your course goals?
- What do you want students to practice as part of the discussion?
- What do you want students to learn from the discussion?
- What does an effective discussion about this topic look like in your course?

Sample Goals
- To introduce important information, perspectives, histories, etc. that aren't usually part of informal discussions about the topic
- To give students practice in applying relevant course material to this timely topic, using realistic dialogue skills, or analyzing and developing a position on important issues, policies, or conventions

As you think about your goals (here and elsewhere), be mindful of your assumptions about the perspectives and prior knowledge students bring to your class. Align your goals with the foundational academic skills and moves of your discipline. To develop and articulate your goals, it's helpful to use the framework of learning taxonomies, such as [Bloom's taxonomy of (cognitive) educational objectives](#) (Bloom et al., 1956), Fink's [taxonomy of significant learning](#) (2013), or Wiggins and McTighe's [six facets of understanding](#) (2005). (See Appendix A for some examples of using these taxonomies to frame goals and assessments in a way that invites a variety of perspectives.)

Some approaches to discussion may align with your goals better than other approaches. Below are two examples of specific approaches gleaned from workshops I attended before the 2025 election. Follow the links to learn more.

Constructive Dialogue

"a form of conversation in which people who have different perspectives try to understand each other— without giving up their own beliefs—in order to live, learn, and work together." The 5 principles of constructive dialogue are

1. Let go of winning.
2. Get curious.
3. Share stories.
4. Navigate conflict with purpose.
5. Find what's shared.

Principle five is grounded in Moral Foundations Theory, or the idea that all humans share six foundational values but prioritize and combine them in different ways. Finding the common ground of these shared values is a key strategy in constructive dialogue.

--*"Foundations in Facilitating Dialogue" Workshop,* *Constructive Dialogue Institute (8/14/24)*

Living Room Conversations

"four to six people sit down for a structured conversation about an agreed upon topic" using a specific 90-minute structure:

- Introductions: Why We're Here (10 mins)
- Conversation Agreements: How We'll Engage (5 mins)
- Round 1: Getting to Know Each Other (10 mins)
- Round 2: Exploring the Topic (40 mins)
- Round 3: Reflecting on the Conversation (15 mins)
- Closing (5 mins)

The Living Room Conversation website has lots of resources, guiding documents, and practice topics with accompanying guides. It also features a list of the most popular topics. (See the list to the right.)

Top Guides of 2025
1. More Curious, Less Furious
2. LGBTQIA+: An Affinity Group Conversation (in Spanish too!)
3. Belonging
4. Immigration
5. Post Election: Moving Forward Together
6. Conversations about Troubled Times
7. Hope
8. Healthy Conflict
9. Social Identity
10. Listening

Plan Shared Content to Ground the Discussion

To ensure discussions are productive and focused, ground them in shared content such as readings, video clips, assignments, or other course materials. This approach provides a common reference point and helps prevent discussions from becoming purely based on opinion.

→ See Appendix B for sample assignments.

During the discussion, encourage students to name these connections.

Plan the Structure of the Discussion

Using structured discussion formats can help you manage challenging conversations more effectively. They don't have to be fancy. Below are a few familiar types that lend themselves to these kinds of discussions:

Round Robin/Circle

- Give each student an opportunity to respond to a question without interruption, but implement some limits (e.g., two minutes, two sentences, two words). Offer the option to pass.

Fishbowl

- Ask the students in the inside circle to discuss a specific topic, position, or perspective, while the rest of the students on the outside *actively* listen and take notes. You can give the outer circle a chance to ask the inside students questions. If possible, shift

Gallery Walk
- Students move individually or in small groups around the room to visit different learning stations you've prepared (e.g., very short texts, advertisement, photograph, data visualization). View these [instructions.](#)

the inner circle to new students and a new perspective or position. Debrief with the whole class.

Jigsaw
- Assign different content, artifacts, or tasks to different groups who then share their findings with the whole class.

The [Active Learning Library](#) is helpful for planning, particularly its "Brainstorm Tool" (blue button on the bottom right): enter your course and some specific learning goals, and the tool generates discussion questions, lecture topics, and case studies (McCreary).

Preparing Students
Establish Trust
... *with* your students by
- being clear about deadlines, policies, expectations, and grading in your course,
- responding to questions and providing feedback in a timely manner (even if this means you let them know it'll be a day or two or more), and
- being clear and explicit about your intentions and goals with the course, their learning, and these discussions in particular.

... *among* your students by designing activities that foster relationships and community in class, such as the following from the Constructive Dialogue Institute:
- "[Quickfire Questions](#)": help students learn about each other (one at a time), practice asking questions, and become curious about others.
- "[Minute Meetups](#)": students rotate in a circle through one-minute Q & As with their peers. The Constructive Dialogue Institute recommends this activity as prep for a more serious discussion.
- "[Listening Sessions](#)": use another topic for students to hone their listening skills with the intent to understand, not just react.

Describe the Characteristics of Your Learning Environment
What does learning look like in your class? What does learning look like in the discussion you're planning? Be as specific as you can, and then share those characteristics with students.

Two characteristics that are relevant in the current context are intellectual humility and discomfort. Feel free to adapt the explanations below.

Intellectual Humility
"We'll be discussing some challenging topics in this course. In our shared guidelines, we all agreed that we want our discussions to be respectful and to invite different perspectives. Remember, our goal is to *understand* the various viewpoints of the people around us, not necessarily to agree on everything. As you listen to opposing views, look for the common values or shared goals. So as we talk about ___, let's all hold our individual opinions lightly and with humility while we thoughtfully consider the range of perspectives."

Discomfort
"As we discuss ___, there's a good chance we'll all be uncomfortable at some point, and perhaps for different reasons. We can engage with challenging ideas while also maintaining a respectful environment, as we described in our shared guidelines. Keep in mind that feeling uncomfortable doesn't mean you're unsafe. In fact, discomfort is an expected part of learning, and growth often happens when we push *beyond* our comfort zones. Think about it as reaching your 'learning edge' and then pushing farther."

Co-Create *& Use* Shared Guidelines

It's now commonplace to establish guidelines or shared agreements as prologues to discussion, especially when addressing contentious topics. This activity isn't always done effectively, so review the following recommendations and examples.

Co-Creating Guidelines

Involve students in creating the guidelines to encourage them to take the discussions seriously.

- Share your *specific* goals for these discussions (see "Identify Your Goals for the Discussion" on page 3), and explain that you want class discussions to be intentional, thoughtful, and informed by the course content.
- Drawing on the characteristics you identified ahead of time (see "Describe the Characteristics of Your Learning Environment" on page 5), prompt students to think about the specific goals and challenges of discussing contentious topics.
- Go beyond quickly creating a list of Do's and Don'ts or simply adopting familiar lists, which may result in performative rather than authentic guidelines, by doing the following:
  → Nudge students to define abstract ideas like "respectful" or "civil" or "safe" (or "intellectual humility" and "discomfort in learning" from above): what does it look and sound like?
  → Suggest something like "Embrace discomfort as an essential part of the learning process," and challenge the tendency to use the language of "safety." There's much to say here, but the short version is that safety has become synonymous for comfortable and conflict-free—two characteristics that can *prevent* learning. (See Boostrom 1998 and Arao and Clemens 2013 for effective critiques of the language of "safe spaces.")
  → Challenge recommendations like "agree to disagree," which allow us to avoid engaging in ideas and discomfort and treat disagreement as inappropriate rather than "a natural outcome in a diverse group"; instead try "controversy with civility," which "allows room for strong emotion and rigorous challenge" (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 144).
  → Encourage an agreement like "Share responsibility for the quality of the discussion," so everyone holds each other accountable, and it's not all on you.
  → Collectively determine what happens when someone—including you—breaks a guideline or agreement.

Below are some sample guidelines that illustrate specificity, detail, and relevance across course contexts, all of which come from University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching.

- **Share responsibility for including all voices in the conversation.** If you tend to have a lot to say, make sure you leave sufficient space to hear from others. If you tend to stay quiet in group discussions, challenge yourself to contribute so others can learn from you.
- **Listen respectfully.** Don't interrupt, turn to technology, or engage in private conversations while others are speaking. Use attentive, courteous body language. Comments that you make (whether asking for clarification, sharing critiques, or expanding on a point) should reflect that you have paid attention to the previous speakers' comments.
- **Be open to changing your perspectives based on what you learn from others.** Try to explore new ideas and possibilities. Think critically about the factors that have shaped your perspectives. Seriously consider points-of-view that differ from your current thinking.
- **Understand that we are bound to make mistakes in this space**, as anyone does when approaching complex tasks or learning new skills. Strive to see your mistakes and others' as valuable elements of the learning process.
- **Understand that your words have effects on others.** Speak with care. If you learn that something you've said was experienced as disrespectful or marginalizing, listen carefully and try to understand that perspective. Learn how you can do better in the future.
- **Take pair work or small group work seriously.** Remember that your peers' learning is partly dependent upon your engagement.

- **Understand that others will come to these discussions with different experiences from yours.** Be careful about assumptions and generalizations you make based only on your own experience. Be open to hearing and learning from other perspectives.
- **Make an effort to get to know other students. Introduce yourself to students sitting near you.** Refer to classmates by name and make eye contact with other students.
- **Understand that there are different approaches to solving problems.** If you are uncertain about someone else's approach, ask a question to explore areas of uncertainty. Listen respectfully to how and why the approach could work.

Sample Guidelines for STEM Courses
- **Be aware of how much you are contributing to in-class discussions.** Try not to silence yourself out of concern for what others will think about what you say. If you have an idea, don't wait for someone else to say it; say it yourself. If you have a tendency to contribute often, give others the opportunity to speak.
- **Listen respectfully.** Don't interrupt, engage in private conversations, or turn to technology while others are speaking. Use attentive, courteous body language.
- **Understand that there are different approaches to solving problems.** If you are uncertain about someone else's approach, ask a question to explore areas of uncertainty. Listen respectfully to how and why the approach could work.
- **Take pairwork or small group work seriously.** Remember that your peers' learning partly depends upon your engagement.
- **Be careful about how you use humor or irony in class.** Keep in mind that we don't all find the same things funny.
- **Make an effort to get to know other students.** Introduce yourself to students sitting near you. Refer to classmates by name and make eye contact with other students.

Sample Guidelines for Language Courses
- **Understand that we are bound to make lots of mistakes in this class, as anyone does when learning a new language.** Take risks and support others in their risk-taking.
- **Be aware of how much you are contributing to discussions, and share responsibility for including all voices in the discussion.** If you have an idea, don't wait for someone else to say it; say it yourself. If you have a tendency to contribute often, give others the opportunity to speak.
- **Listen respectfully.** Don't interrupt or engage in private conversations while others are speaking. Use attentive, courteous body language. Comments that you make (whether asking for clarification, sharing critiques, or expanding on a point) should reflect that you have paid attention to the previous speakers' comments.
- **Take pairwork or small group work seriously.** Remember that your peers' learning is partly dependent upon your engagement.
- **Make an effort to get to know other students.** Introduce yourself to students sitting near you. Refer to classmates by name and make eye contact with other students.
- **Respect others' right to hold opinions and beliefs that differ from your own.** Be open to hearing their perspectives. Be open to changing your perspectives based on what you learn from others. Be okay with disagreement.

Using the Guidelines

Call attention to these co-created guidelines throughout the semester. Below are some ways to regularly use the guidelines:
- Distribute a copy of the list to each student, and post it on your Canvas site.
- Regularly display the list in class (e.g., a whiteboard, projected screen, slide, piece of butcher paper). Invite a student to read it aloud.
- Revisit the list a few weeks into the semester to collectively reflect on what's missing and/or what needs to be revised.

- At midpoint, ask students to use the list to self-assess their participation ("What have you done well, and where can you grow?" "How have you positively contributed to the learning environment for everyone?") and provide feedback to the class as a whole ("Where have we effectively followed our agreements, and where do we need to be more intentional?").
- Call attention to the list at strategic moments, like before a potentially contentious discussion or in an expectedly tense moment.
- Share the list with subsequent classes as a starting point for their own list. What's missing? What would they change?

Encourage Students to Practice (Using Technology)

You can encourage students—especially those who are particularly anxious—to practice participating in challenging conversations using technology. Two possibilities are below:

- The Constructive Dialogue Institute's Conversation Simulator is an online interactive tool for students to use "three science-backed strategies [establish a collaborative goal, get curious, tell a personal story] for navigating difficult conversations and practice them through a personalized interactive online simulator."
- Text-based generative AI tools like Gemini can serve as useful conversation partners. Give your students a prompt they can use to initiate and guide the practice discussion, such as the following:

> You are an AI conversation partner designed to engage in constructive dialogue. Your role is to act as a fellow student with your own views, while also being able to represent various viewpoints fairly and encourage thoughtful discussion. Please follow these guidelines: [*Insert the co-created discussion guidelines*.] I am a student practicing constructive dialogue. Let's discuss the following topic: ___. Begin by asking me for my initial thoughts on this issue. Then, engage in a back-and-forth dialogue, sharing your own views and representing different perspectives as they naturally arise in our conversation. Your goal is to help me practice articulating my views clearly, consider other viewpoints, and engage in thoughtful discourse aimed at learning.

After either of these exercises, ask students to reflect on the discussion strategies they observed or practiced, any new perspectives they encountered, how they handled disagreements or challenging viewpoints, and how they will apply what they learned in discussions with humans.

Facilitating Effectively
Serve as a Model & Guide

During the discussion, your behavior and demeanor set the tone, so model how to ask questions, respond to misinformation, and engage in dialogue aimed at learning.

Maintain an active role in guiding the discussion without over- or under-controlling it. Consider the distinctions below:

Neglect	Guide	Control
— **Provide vague or no guidelines,** missing an opportunity to help students learn effective moves for challenging discussions and disagreements. — **Avoid stepping in** when discussions become heated, disrespectful, or off topic. — **Allow dominant voices or perspectives to take over**, sidelining quieter students and diverse perspectives.	— **Establish clear expectations and guidelines for discussion** but allow flexibility. — **Balance openness and structure** by fostering exploration while maintaining focus on learning goals. — **Ask open-ended questions** that invite a range of perspectives. — **Encourage participation** from all students by facilitating turn-taking and explicitly inviting quieter voices. — **Encourage the use of evidence** by having students support their comments with	— **Enforce a narrow script or agenda** without allowing for a range of ideas or the flow of conversation among students. — **Dominate the conversation** with your own opinions, questions, and/or answers, leaving little room for student input or interaction. — **Call on just a few students**, enforcing the dominance of certain voices and perspectives. — **Correct, critique, or interrupt frequently**, discouraging risk-

Neglect	Guide	Control
– **Make no effort to connect ideas** or summarize key points (or to have students do this), resulting in a scattered or incoherent discussion. – **Avoid addressing misinformation or inappropriate behavior,** missing opportunities for deeper learning and silently condoning bad behavior.	course content, facts, examples, or other appropriate kinds of evidence. – **Actively listen and paraphrase** (and help students do this) to ensure understanding and connection between ideas. – **Acknowledge emotions** while steering the discussion back to your learning goals. – **Intervene** to address inappropriate behavior, clarify misunderstandings, or redirect unproductive tangents.	taking, shutting down diverse perspectives, and micromanaging students' speaking turns. – **Shut down sensitive or contentious topics** quickly, preventing deep engagement. – **Ignore or shut down emotions** instead of using them as a starting point for deeper discussion.

But how do you facilitate without under- or over-controlling? The previous sections (especially the scripts you prepared in "Develop Specific Prompts and Scripts" starting on page 2) will help you implement a guided approach to facilitating discussions about controversial or sensitive topics.

Encourage Multiple Perspectives, Including (Relevant) Minority Viewpoints

Ensure that minority viewpoints that are relevant to the course content and your learning goals are heard and considered. A university classroom is one of the rare spaces where students can rigorously explore perspectives they may never encounter—or may avoid—in everyday life. When less popular viewpoints are excluded, students lose critical opportunities to analyze, question, and understand ideas that profoundly shape public life

If such a perspective isn't getting appropriate airtime, try the "Five Minute Rule" activity in which everyone agrees to spend just five minutes *trying to understand* that perspective without criticism*:*

> "Let's spend the next five minutes exploring this perspective. What are some of its valid points, meaningful underlying values, or positive goals that we haven't considered? What parts have we overlooked? In what ways or under what conditions might it be true? What would change if we believed this perspective?"

Encourage Listening & Curiosity Across Difference

One of my key takeaways from the Constructive Dialogue Institute's "Foundations in Facilitating Dialogue" workshop (August 2024) was the facilitator's off-script observation that "the practice of asking genuine questions is missing from many classrooms because **the first and most common move students make is sharing what *they* think, and they rarely ask about what others think**." Students may ask questions, he noted, but they're often aimed at reinforcing their own thoughts, rather than genuinely seeking another's. The distinction between curiosity and agenda questions below can guide students toward curiosity and openness with others.

As the class engages in conflicting views, ask students to listen to other perspectives carefully and summarize what they hear. Encourage them to ask questions based on curiosity rather than an agenda or effort to prove the other wrong.

	Curiosity Questions	Agenda Questions
Intent	Genuine interest, exploration, desire to learn more	Push a specific perspective or preconceived answer

	Curiosity Questions	Agenda Questions
Purpose	Explore ideas, promote exchange of ideas, encourage understanding, discovery	Confirm one's own beliefs and biases, subtly undermine another perspective in the guise of inquiry
Characteristics	Open-ended, invite multiple perspectives, often begin with "how," "why," or "what if"	Closed or leading, invite or imply a right answer
Examples	− *"What makes this important to you?"* − *"How did you feel about that?"* − *"What led you to this point of view?"* − *"Why do you think that happened?"*	− *"Don't you know the problem with…?"* − *"Haven't you considered…?"* − *"Isn't it clear that…?"* − *"Why would you take that position if you cared about …?"*

They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing (Graff & Berkenstein, 2021) is based on the notion that we typically begin academic communication with someone else's perspective before expressing our own, a move that situates our ideas within a scholarly conversation but also—when used in the classroom—one that slows down reactive discourse and promotes accuracy. This tiny textbook can be used to frame disagreement in productive, structured ways through templates or conversational scaffolds for expressing strong or divergent views with humility, clarity, and respect.

You can bring these moves into class discussion by teaching students to begin their comments by summarizing the view they're responding to, and to do so fairly to reduce mischaracterization and escalation. They may summarize a perspective they've read or heard about *("They say that…," "Some people argue…," "A common view is…," "X believes…")* or something a classmate has said (*"What I hear you saying is…," "If I understand correctly, you're arguing…"*).

After they demonstrate understanding by fairly representing another position, students can pivot to their own position. Graff and Birkenstein offer templates for how to disagree (*"I disagree because…," "I see it differently because…"*), but more importantly they also offer ways to disagree with nuance (*"I'd complicate that by adding…," "I see the pattern you're describing. For me, the takeaway is slightly different…," "I see the value in prioritizing ___. I tend to prioritize ___, so I arrive somewhere else…"*), and how to avoid oversimplified binaries by agreeing and disagreeing simultaneously (*"I agree with X that..., but I would add that …," "While I disagree with X's conclusion, I share their concern about …."*).

Finally, Graff and Birkenstein offer language for entering conversations with humility *("I've never had this experience, but from what I understand…," "I'm still learning about this issue, and here's what I'm noticing…")* and to acknowledge what's at stake in discussing controversial topics (*"This matters because…," "This issue affects …," "Understanding this helps us…"*).

Introduce Pauses

Because of the discomfort of these discussions, periodically ask everyone to pause for silent thinking or writing. This time will allow the students (and you) to individually process, regroup, and/or catch their breath.

An extended kind of pause is asynchronicity. Facilitating discussions on Canvas provides students with more time to reflect and compose thoughtful responses.

Share Your Own Views?

Students may ask you to express your own views. In deciding how to respond, consider not only your comfort level but also how sharing your perspective may impact *all of your students* (not just those who share your views), the learning environment, and your goals for the discussion.

Providing Closure and Reflection

Plan a little time at the end of the discussion to consolidate and reinforce the learning.

Summarize Key Points

At the end of the discussion, ask for volunteers to summarize the main ideas and different viewpoints represented in the discussion. (If you're short on time, of course, you may do it, but default to asking students to do this work when you can.)

Encourage Reflection

A short writing prompt can encourage individual reflection and give students time to wind down from the discussion. Your prompt(s) can be about the topic of the discussion, or the discussion itself. The latter will help reinforce the kinds of conversation habits you want students to learn and carry forward.

The Constructive Dialogue Institute offers the three types of debrief questions, adapted below:

Students' Experiences	Learning	Discussion Guidelines
– "How did the discussion go for you?" – "What did you notice about the dialogue?" – "Was part of the discussion especially difficult or uncomfortable for you? What do you make of that?"	– "What are the three most important points you learned today?" – "What surprised you about our conversation?" – "What did you learn from what someone else said that you wouldn't have thought of on your own?" – "What was the most challenging idea you encountered today?" – "How has your thinking changed as a result of today's discussion?" – "What questions remain unanswered for you?"	– "How did our discussion guidelines support your participation in this conversation?" – "How did they challenge your participation?" – "Did the class successfully follow our guidelines?" – "Which were upheld particularly well? Which should we work on?"

Share Your Own Reflections

Model the reflections above by sharing your thoughts: how you experienced the discussion, what you learned from it, and where the discussion guidelines worked (or didn't).

Provide Resources for Further Learning & Support

Contentious topics and challenging discussions are difficult to leave at the door at the end of class. Some students may want to continue discussing the issues or need additional support. You may offer follow-up conversation and support, but also remind them of the range of resources across campus.

–   Name your availability outside of class periods: "If anyone wants to discuss this topic further or has concerns about today's discussion, remember that my office hours are ___, or you can make an appointment. I'm here to support your learning and our learning environment."
–   Remind students of the relevant services available across campus, such as counseling and academic support services.

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Appendix A.

I collaborated with Gemini to develop some these examples of learning goals and assessments framed neutrally and aligned with some foundational learning taxonomies.

Sample Goals and Assessments Using Bloom's Taxonomy

Bloom's Level	Skill Focus	Neutrally Framed Goals	Neutrally Framed Assessments
Remembering	Recalling or recognizing information.	Students will be able to list the five stages of demographic transition theory (vs Students will recall the mandatory steps for anti-bias reporting procedures).	A fill-in-the-blank or multiple-choice quiz where students identify and define core theoretical concepts from readings. (Grade on informational accuracy.)
Understanding	Constructing meaning from	Students will be able to summarize the key differences between two	A paraphrasing exercise where students explain in their own

Bloom's Level	Skill Focus	Neutrally Framed Goals	Neutrally Framed Assessments
	instructional messages.	major theoretical models of gender (vs Students will explain why they must use inclusive language in professional settings).	words the meaning of a complex legal or scientific concept (e.g., "structural inequity") without offering a personal opinion or judgment.
Applying	Using a procedure or skill in a familiar or new situation.	Students will be able to use the principles of economic analysis to calculate the effects of a minimum wage change on a specific demographic (vs Students will demonstrate commitment to social justice principles in their policy recommendations).	A problem set or short memo where students apply a learned formula, scientific method, or legal framework to a hypothetical case study. (Grade on correct execution of the procedure.)
Analyzing	Breaking material into constituent parts and determining how the parts relate.	Students will be able to differentiate between the evidence supporting cultural explanations versus structural explanations for crime rates in a city (vs Students will deconstruct the power dynamics inherent in the classroom structure).	A concept mapping assignment where students break down a long-form article into its claims, evidence, assumptions, and logical fallacies. (Grade on accuracy of decomposition and logical structure.)
Evaluating	Making judgments based on objective criteria and standards.	Students will be able to critique the methodological rigor and statistical validity of a published study on racial health disparities (Students will judge the ethics of a historical figure's actions based on modern societal values.).	A formal peer review or research critique where students appraise an academic product against a set of objective, scholarly criteria (e.g., sample size, reliability, use of primary sources). (Grade on quality of the critique, not the belief expressed.)
Creating	Putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole.	Students will be able to design a novel, evidence-based policy proposal that synthesizes competing research findings to address climate change impacts on vulnerable populations (Students will develop a plan for transformative anti-racist action in their workplace).	A final project or capstone (e.g., a grant proposal, architectural design, or new curriculum) where students construct a product and justify their choices using evidence and academic theory. (Grade on coherence, feasibility, and quality of justification.)

Sample Goals and Assessments Fink's [Taxonomy of Significant Learning](#)

Fink's Category	Neutrally Framed Goals	Neutrally Framed Assessments
Foundational Knowledge (Understanding & Remembering)	Students will be able to **identify and describe** the key figures, policy goals, and historical methods of three different social change movements (Students will know the	Short-answer exam questions requiring students to **define** specific terms or **list** the components of a model/theory. (Grade on accuracy of information.)

Fink's Category	Neutrally Framed Goals	Neutrally Framed Assessments
	moral imperative for social change movements).	
Application (Skills, Thinking, Managing Projects)	Students will be able to **apply** three distinct theoretical frameworks (e.g., sociological, economic, political) to **analyze** a specific case study of inequality (vs Students will apply tools to **dismantle** systems of oppression in a case study).	A case study report where students **diagnose** a problem using a specific academic model and **propose** two different, evidence-based policy solutions. (Grade on rigor of application and evidence.)
Integration (Connecting Ideas)	Students will be able to **integrate** knowledge from three different disciplinary perspectives to **explain** a contemporary political or social phenomenon (vs Students will **recognize** their personal privilege and how it **intersects** with power structures).	A **synthesis essay** where students connect course concepts with external scholarly works to **articulate** a nuanced explanation of a complex problem. (Grade on coherence and integration of ideas.)
Human Dimension (Understanding Self & Others)	Students will be able to **analyze and articulate** the **diverse perspectives** and experiences of individuals within the context of systemic change (vs Students will **develop empathy** for the lived experiences of a particular group).	A **comparative analysis** project where students document and **compare** two conflicting, yet evidence-based, scholarly accounts of a sensitive historical event. (Grade on objective comparison, clarity, and use of evidence, not on which perspective is favored.)
Caring (Developing New Interests/Values)	Students will be able to **critically evaluate** the ethical arguments and professional standards surrounding social justice and diversity in their field (vs Students will feel **committed** to advancing diversity and equity in their future workplace).	A **formal position paper** or debate on an ethical dilemma in the student's future profession. (Grade on the **strength of the argument** and **use of evidence** and professional codes, not on the ethical position they choose to defend.)
Learning How to Learn (Becoming a Self-Directed Learner)	Students will be able to **identify and evaluate** the reliability of different information sources and their own assumptions on controversial topics (vs Students will **reflect** on how their personal activism contributes to their learning).	A **meta-cognitive journal** or learning log (graded on completeness and depth of self-reflection on the *learning process*—what skills were difficult, how conflicting ideas were reconciled, etc.)

Wiggins and McTighe's [Six Facets of Understanding](#)

Facet	Neutrally Framed Goals	Neutrally Framed Assessments
Explanation	Students will be able to **construct and defend** a causal model that explains the persistence of a specific economic disparity, citing competing theoretical mechanisms (vs Students will explain why systemic inequality is the root cause of poverty).	A **formal research proposal** requiring students to **diagram a causal relationship** between two variables, complete with a narrative explanation and justification for each causal step.

Facet	Neutrally Framed Goals	Neutrally Framed Assessments
Interpretation	Students will be able to **compare and contrast** two equally plausible scholarly interpretations of a complex historical document or literary text (vs Students will **discover the true meaning** and moral lessons of the novel's social critique).	A **written interpretation** where students select the interpretation that is best supported by textual evidence and **logically refutes** the competing interpretation. (Grade on evidence and logic.)
Application	Students will be able to **adapt and apply** a learned theoretical model (e.g., a supply-chain framework) to **analyze** a problem in a new, distinct context (e.g., a non-profit distribution challenge) (vs Students will **use** their knowledge of equity principles to design inclusive products).	A **simulated professional task** (e.g., a risk assessment report or business proposal) where students **apply** a learned method to solve a novel, technical problem.
Perspective	Students will be able to **articulate and defend** the logical coherence of a viewpoint that fundamentally opposes their own position on a controversial policy or scientific theory (vs Students will **adopt** the viewpoint of a marginalized group to recognize institutional failures).	A **position paper** requiring students to research and formally **present the strongest possible argument** for the opposing side of a debate (often called a "Devil's Advocate" assignment). (Grade on the rigor and accuracy of the argument presented, not agreement.)
Empathy	Students will be able to **analyze and articulate** the cognitive and emotional responses that are commonly described in the psychological literature regarding conflict, exclusion, or trauma (vs Students will **feel** the devastating impact of racial bias on the lives of others).	A **case study analysis** where students **identify** the common psychological/behavioral responses described by individuals in the scenario and **cite academic research** to explain those responses. (Grade on correct identification and psychological/academic citation.)
Self-Knowledge	Students will be able to **identify and evaluate** the core assumptions, beliefs, and values that inform their initial response to a novel, controversial issue (vs Students will **discover their personal biases** that contribute to systemic inequality).	A **structured reflective essay** where students use a guided rubric to **document their initial assumptions** on a topic, **identify the source of those assumptions**, and **compare** them against new course evidence. (Grade on the rigor of the self-evaluation process, not the nature of the assumptions.)

Appendix B. Sample Assignments

Discussion Structures from the Constructive Dialogue Institute
The CDI features class activities for effective discussions:

- "Establishing Group Intentions": "This collaborative activity guides students in developing shared intentions for meaningful group dialogue."
- "Structures for Dialogue": "Structuring group sharing is key to sustaining a constructive dialogue. This resource lists and describes creative approaches to inviting student sharing.
- "Listening Sessions": "This activity challenges students to practice listening to understand – not simply to respond— and allows them to share without fear of interruption."

- "The Debrief": "This guide outlines the different ways to guide a student debrief after a class, dialogue, or group meeting of any purpose."

They even have one for a recent controversial topic:
- "CDI Conversation Guide on Utah Shooting": "This guide helps campus leaders and facilitators create space for open, supportive dialogue after the tragic killing of Charlie Kirk at Utah Valley University."

A Living Room Conversation about Being "More Curious, Less Furious"
Use the precise 90-minute structure of Living Room Conversations, or abbreviate it using your own judgment. This guide (requires free registration) includes specific instructions, but the gist of the discussion is

> "Many media and culture sources promote the idea that we should view those who disagree with us as enemies. This approach limits our ability to solve the major problems of our day. Research shows that curiosity which seeks multiple perspectives can open the mind, increase empathy, reduce fears, encourage self-awareness and promote humility. Curiosity about how and why other people arrive at values and beliefs can lead to better solutions, understanding and appreciation. Life experiences shape who we are, and sharing stories can help bridge gaps and encourage mutual respect. We can make a choice to become more curious and less furious. In this conversation we will share thoughts and experiences about choosing to be curious."

Their guiding questions are
- How would you rate your curiosity from one to ten? What impact has curiosity had on you?
- What concerns, if any, make you hesitant to express your genuine interest in the different views of another person?
- How has your life been enriched because you asked another person how they came to hold an opposing viewpoint? What happened?
- How do you project your genuine desire to listen and learn rather than debate or judge?
- What assumptions do people make about you or your life?
- What expressions of curiosity would you welcome?

(Living Room Conversations, 2025)

Understanding the Use of Data & Statistics
Guide students in explaining how their knowledge of sampling affects their understanding of media reports on polling. They should read (and cite and link to) a relevant article.

Assign David Kung's "Math for Informed Citizens" Ted Talk. Ask students find news articles with similar statistics examples that claim one thing but mean another.

Integrating More Perspectives
"Turn Tensions Into Data" (Lim, 2025)
> This introductory exercise eases students into an atmosphere of open collegial discussion. Surveys or anonymous polls quantify disagreements, and then we analyze the results as a class.
> *Example*: Class Belief Inventory—anonymously poll students on hot-button questions (e.g., "Is systemic racism a major problem?"). The objective here would be to compare the class's responses to national survey data. Potential discussion topics: Why might differences exist? What shapes our perceptions?

"Gamifying Ideological Tensions" (Lim, 2025)
> This class activity turns assigned readings into structured, rule-bound games where students must defend positions they don't personally hold.
> *Example*: Role-Play a Summit—Students are assigned roles (e.g., Jordan Peterson, bell hooks, climate scientist, TikTok influencer) and must collaborate to solve a fictional problem (e.g., redesigning a curriculum). They must cite course readings to justify their choices.

"Hostile Influencers as Primary Sources" (Lim, 2025)

This in-class activity treats [controversial media] figures ... not as adversaries but as authors of texts to analyze, to disarm defensiveness and position students as critical investigators.

Example: "Compare/contrast an episode of [X podcast] with a peer-reviewed article on the same topic. How do their arguments differ in structure, evidence and rhetoric? Whom do you find more persuasive, and why?"

"Therapy for Arguments" ([Lim, 2025](#))

This fun early activity teaches students to diagnose weak arguments—whether from [a popular media figure], a feminist theorist or you—using principles of logic.

Example: Argument Autopsy—Students dissect a viral social media post, podcast clip or course reading. Identify logical fallacies, cherry-picked evidence or unstated assumptions. Reward students for critiquing all sides.

"Intellectual Sleuthing" ([Lim, 2025](#))

This is a scaffolded midterm writing assignment building up to a final essay. Ask students to trace the origins of their favorite influencers' ideas. Many anti-establishment figures borrow from (or distort) academic theories—show students how to connect the dots.

Example: Genealogy of an Idea—Pick a claim from a podcast (e.g., "universities indoctrinate students"). Research its history: When was this idea popular in mainstream news or on social media? Are there any institutes, think tanks, influencers or politicians associated with this idea? What are the stated missions and goals of those sources? Where do they get their funding? Which academics agree or disagree, and why?

"Leverage 'Forbidden Topics' as Case Studies" ([Lim, 2025](#))

If students resent "liberal bias," lean into it: make bias itself the subject of analysis. This might work as a discussion prompt for tutorials or think-pair-share group work.

Example: "Is This Reading Biased?"—Assign a short text students might call "woke" (e.g., feminist theory) and a countertext (e.g., Peterson's critique of postmodernism). Have students evaluate both using a rubric: What counts as bias? Is objectivity possible? How do they define "truth"?

"Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Assignments" ([Lim, 2025](#))

The final essay assignment gives students agency to explore topics they care about, even if they critique my field. Clear guardrails are important here to ensure rigor.

Example: Passion Project: Students design a research question related to the course—even if it challenges the course's assumptions. They must engage with three or more course texts and two or more outside sources, as in favorite influencers or authorities, even those who oppose course themes.

"Red Team vs. Blue Team" ([Lim, 2025](#))

For essays, students submit two versions: one arguing their personal view and one arguing the counterpoint. Grading is based on how well they engage evidence, not their stance.