

Skills for Engaging in Civil Discourse

Skill 1: Discourse Differentiation

Know the type of conversation in which you are participating. Depending on the medium, academic discussion, debate, dialogue, deliberation, and social media have different conversational structures, dynamics, purposes, audiences and impacts. Ensure all participants know how the medium and setting impact the aims and outcomes of the civil discourse they are engaging in and recognize that each approach has strengths and limitations based on the context.

Skill 2: Openness to Inquiry

Approach discourse with curiosity and an openness to new learning. Learning comes from expanding our comfort zones. Aim for being brave rather than being comfortable. Expect your worldview to be challenged and demonstrate respect and humility while challenging others. Consider more than two perspectives on an issue and remain open to questioning your own beliefs and assumptions before concluding. Remember that everyone is at a different place in their education and awareness; providing people with space, grace, and leniency while learning is crucial in a healthy academic environment.

Skill 3: Information Literacy

Productive civil discourse requires the ability to find, organize, evaluate, and communicate information. We are responsible for using reputable and diverse sources of information backed by research, critical thinking, and moral and ethical reasoning. In evaluating claims, it is important to assess the reliability and credibility of information sources, critically evaluate the strength of hypotheses and arguments, and challenge dogmatic perspectives. While an academic community must support the freedom to question and express varying points of view, not every perspective or conclusion meets the standards and values of academic inquiry.

Skill 4: Critical Thinking

Human problems are complex, and people bring a diversity of perspectives to discourse. Because of these complexities, nuance can be lost—reducing issues to oversimplistic, dogmatic bottom lines that can minimize difference and increase polarization. Critical thinking requires appreciating these dynamics and resisting the oversimplification of ideas. Academic inquiry includes avoiding binary thinking and searching for nuance and complexity.

Skill 5: Recognizing Perspective Limitations

Contribute to civil discourse as an individual and expect the same from others. A group representative can only speak on behalf of the group if they have been elected or appointed by the group to speak for them. No single person can speak on behalf of an identity group.

Skill 6: Effective Listening

Effective listening requires demonstrating respect to another person by listening to learn, understand, and recognize values. Effective listening advances essential components to positive discourse.

Skill 7: Empathetic Communication

Empathy entails the ability to understand and relate to others. Empathetic communication is an important determinant of how well we communicate with each other. How your point is delivered is as important as the point itself. Practice self-regulation even as you share personal experiences and express yourself with strong emotions. Recognize the implications of your speech and the points you share, including the potential for harm. Remember that you are a member of an academic community and are responsible for being respectful and demonstrating care for all community members.

Skill 8: Constructive Disagreement

Institutions of higher learning have a duty to cultivate constructive disagreement; disagreement is neither good nor bad. Every campus community member contributes a unique value and viewpoint given their roles, identities, worldviews, and responsibilities. Collective agreement is not always achievable or desirable. Therefore, the quality of constructive disagreement depends on whether parties are respectful, open to listening, and whether they rely on sound rational arguments.

Skill 9: Conflict De-escalation

Evaluate situations to identify if oneself or others are ready to enter civil discourse, or whether self-regulation, co-regulation, support, interpersonal support, or leaving the situation are more appropriate initial steps in that moment.

Skill 10: Conflict Management

Normalize the process of participating in civil discourse. Disagreement and conflict are a normal and continuous part of life. Engaging in civil discourse and managing conflict are essential skills in modern society.



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