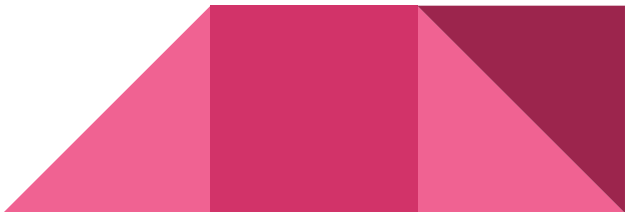# Managing Dialogue

**Common Problems in Dialogue Facilitation: What They Look Like and What to Do**

*created by Dr. Sarah Ropp, Fall 2020*

# MANAGEMENT: COMMON PROBLEMS

Contents:

1. Dominating the conversation
2. Speaking in generalizations
3. Engaging in debate rather than dialogue
4. Reluctance to engage
5. Handling conflict, tension, and triggering
6. General guidelines for management
7. Self-management: When you, the facilitator, are the offender

# DOMINATING THE CONVERSATION

**What it is:** A few core students are always the first to raise their hands, the first to speak up, the first to respond after someone else speaks. May or may not interrupt, be stereotypically "pushy," be "loud," etc--and facilitator, too, can be guilty.

**What it looks like:**
"Can I just say something?" (when they've already said multiple things)
"Actually, if I could finish what I said earlier…" (when they already spoke at length)
"Yeah, that's what I was trying to say. See, …" (hijacking someone else's comment)

**What it *doesn't* look like:**
Asking questions/drawing other people in (this is a **good** use of extrovert power!)

# DOMINATING THE CONVERSATION

Some possible approaches:

- "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet."
- "Would everyone who's already spoken more than once today please scoot your chair back / put an asterisk in front of your name?"
- [Private chat message to offender] "Thanks so much for your contributions--would you do me a favor and help me get some others involved in the conversation?"
- [To a participant who hasn't said anything yet] "What are your thoughts on this? I remember you said x the first session; do you think this relates?"

# SPEAKING IN GENERALIZATIONS

**What it is:** A consistent pattern of speaking about/for an entire group of people; generalizing one's own experience as though it were universal; denying another's lived experience on the basis of facts (or experience!) that **supposedly** disprove it

**What it looks like:**

"Well, I know Asian kids' parents are really tough on them."
"We all share the same basic values, if we could just learn to see that."
"White working class people feel ignored by the government."
"This generation is so anxious and depressed all the time."
"Male privilege is a myth--I'm female and I've never felt disadvantaged."
"There are so many Latino orgs on campus; how could you feel alienated?"

# SPEAKING IN GENERALIZATIONS

Some possible approaches:

- "Please speak only for yourself."
- "You're saying 'we.' Who do you mean by that?"
- "Can you give a more specific example from your own life?"
- Redirect towards feelings: "You sound angry/frustrated/like this is something you have thought a lot about. Can you say more about why this topic is personally so important to you?"
- Call in others from the group: "Does anyone want to respond to that? Does this sound like a fair statement to you all?"

# DEBATE RATHER THAN DIALOGUE

**What it is:** Consciously or unconsciously engaging in discourse whose implicit goal is to "win"--to prove your ideas, experiences, and worldview are superlative in some way. Here's a useful handout on the difference between dialogue & debate.

**What it looks like:**

"You might feel like that, but if you look at the facts and statistics…"

"Most of what you said makes sense, but…"

"I know that people with your background often…"

"I think I am the one who knows the most about this here."

**What it *doesn't* look like:**

Calling out blatantly wrong/dehumanizing language or comments!

# DEBATE RATHER THAN DIALOGUE

Some possible approaches:

- "Can you speak just for yourself?"
- "Remember, this is not about winning an argument."
- Take a break and do a spiral journal (or other reflective/meditative practice)
- Redirect towards feelings and identity: "Why is this so important to you? Have you had personal experiences with this?"
- Call in the group: "What is happening here? Does this feel more like dialogue or debate to you all? What can we do about it?"

# RELUCTANCE TO ENGAGE

**What it is:** Shyness; hyper-politeness; unwillingness to share opinion/experiences; resistance to conflict and disagreement; endless deflection of questions

**What it looks like:**

"I don't really know."
"Um, I think all perspectives are probably valid?"
"No, no, you're probably right, I'm remembering wrong."
"I think someone else probably has a better answer to that."
"........."

**What it *doesn't* look like:**
Admitting wrongness/apologizing for impact!

# RELUCTANCE TO ENGAGE

Some possible approaches:

- <u>Differentiate modes of response</u>: have people respond in writing (in chat or via a tool like <u>mentimeter.com</u>) rather than only orally.
- Relieve the pressure of speaking in front of the whole group by <u>using pairs or small groups</u> (in breakout rooms if online).
- <u>Affirm all contributions</u>; don't make people feel they have to meet a certain standard of rigor or depth in order to be appreciated for participating.
- Approach student privately & <u>ask how you can support them</u>.
- <u>Do not push, tease, cajole, or put on the spot</u>. "C'mon, I know *you* have something to say…Nothing? Really? C'mon…." Please don't do this.

# HANDLING CONFLICT, TENSION, & TRIGGERING

**What it is:** There is a palpable sense of tension in the room and one or more people is visibly upset. There may be active or passive aggression being expressed towards other students. Two students might get locked in a back-and-forth. Someone might say something offensive or disrespectful.

**What it looks like:**
Withdrawal/refusal to engage any more in the conversation
Leaving the room/Zoom
Muttering/sullenness
Overt arguing
Passive aggression (e.g. "_Some_ people here might think…")
Visible emotion (like crying, difficulty breathing, shaking)

# HANDLING CONFLICT, TENSION, & TRIGGERING

- Do not force anyone to be a part of a conversation they do not want to be a part of. <u>Let people leave or disengage</u> (but follow up with them later).
- You do not need to remain 'neutral' or 'impartial' in cases in which people are being insulted, degraded, dehumanized, etc. You are allowed to say, simply and firmly, <u>"That is wrong/inappropriate and you need to stop."</u>
- <u>"Let's take a break."</u> Take 5-10 min to regroup and calm down. Decide if the topic can be returned to after, or if the group should move on to a new one.
- <u>Remind the group of the norms they agreed on</u> (not in a scolding way).
- <u>Always follow up</u>: privately ("You seemed upset during the discussion tonight--are you all right?") & publicly ("Things got tense")
- <u>Attend to your own needs</u>/boundaries.

# MANAGEMENT: GENERAL GUIDELINES

1. Modeling is the most powerful way to "manage"! Always.
2. Affirm what people are doing right. (And affirm more than you "correct.")
3. When a problem arises, affirm first, then redirect. (e.g. "I trust that you didn't intend to say something disrespectful. However, …")
4. Trust that people want to be ethical, equitable participants; project this trust in your body language, facial expression, and words.
5. Notice and validate efforts to correct behaviors.
6. Have participants do the work: Encourage frequent self-reflection among participants, including regarding their own triggers. Ask them to track their own participation. Have them use this sheet to assess their own contributions.

# SELF-MANAGEMENT: When You're the Offender

What if you, as the facilitator, find yourself dominating the conversation, making generalizations, getting involved in debates or arguments, feeling too shy to intervene in conflicts, or getting triggered yourself?

- If you catch yourself or get called out in the moment: acknowledge it and use it as a learning moment for yourself & the whole group. E.g. "I just made a really problematic assumption. I'm sorry." (If triggered: "I need a minute.")
- Self-reflect before, during, & after every dialogue. Work "BTS" to identify your biases & assumptions through conversation, journaling, reading, etc.
- Model self-reflection & accountability @ next session. E.g. "Last time, a comment was made about x. I should have said something, and I didn't."
- Follow up with individual students privately as well, if necessary