



Making Space for Emotion

PART I: WELCOMING THE WHOLE PERSON INTO DIALOGUE

PRINCIPLES + PRACTICES

▶ PREVIEW THE CONTENT

Content advisories: Let people know what's coming, not only in terms of the content and materials, but also questions and activities that you will use to engage the texts and topics.

- **Helpful:** a broad, one-time statement (e.g. in syllabus) that hints at "difficult topics" or "potentially upsetting texts"
- **More helpful:** A general statement + basic advisories ahead of content you estimate will be particularly challenging, e.g. "Be aware: This text contains references to X"
- **Even more helpful:** A general statement + more detailed advisories specifying excerpts participants can opt to avoid + previews of how the material will be addressed in dialogue
- **Most helpful:** A general statement + detailed, specific previews of the content of every session's texts and discussion questions.

Allow for processing before dialogue takes place, e.g. ask participants to submit a journal reflection or annotations w/ their responses to a difficult text ahead of the session.

▶ ALLOW A RANGE OF OPTING OUT

Honor a spectrum of self-protection rather than enforce a binary of either full participation or complete refusal. Choose what degree(s) of opting out you will allow given your purpose and objectives + what (if any) penalties will exist. Some opting-out options:

Fully opt out: decline to engage with the text and/or participate at all in the conversation

Avoid a portion of the text and/or discussion

Engage with an alternate text (it helps to have one in mind)

Participate in alternative ways (e.g. submit a written reflection ahead of/during the session vs. engage in oral dialogue)

▶ NORMALIZE EMOTION

Assume that *someone* has personal experience related to each topic. Plan with that person in mind. Don't assume any topic is inherently "low-stakes" or that this population of participants has surely been untouched by it. Even if no one has trauma related to the topic, everyone will benefit from the increased sensitivity and care.

Let participants see your own emotional responses, both implicitly (e.g. tearing up) and explicitly (e.g. "I'm angry"). Don't laugh it off, minimize it, apologize for it, or strive hard to avoid even having an emotional reaction. This is hard and takes cultivated stamina for vulnerability. It's also okay for participants to see you wrestle with that discomfort.

▶ CRAFT NORMS TO HONOR EMOTION

Make respect for diverse emotional reactions a core value (not just diverse ideas). Reflect that value in norms. Some examples:

"Affirm vulnerability"

"Make emotions part of the conversation"

"Maintain confidentiality"

"Validate others' emotions even if you don't understand them"

▶ CULTIVATE EMOTIONAL LITERACY

Build in self-reflection to help participants identify their triggers + sore spots, their typical response patterns, and ideas/plans for how to cope.

Use mindfulness exercises to help participants connect to what they are feeling in the moment + help them regulate emotion & ground themselves before, during, after dialogue.

Equip participants with scripts to draw on when they are overcome. Emphasize that they don't need to justify or even identify their reactions in order for emotions to be recognized + accommodated. Examples:

"I need a minute."

"I'm feeling emotional so this may come out jumbled, but it's important to me to express."

"This is personal for me."

▶ FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS OF CARE

Encourage peer-to-peer support within + beyond the dialogue session. Have participants "turn and talk" to a neighbor about their emotional reactions. Coach them in affirming + supporting one another. Suggest or require that participants meet each other for coffee or go for a walk after the session to process together.

Express care as a facilitator within + beyond the dialogue session. Use people's names. Express interest in people's lives + joy in their presence. Notice when they're down. Share support resources. Host community office hours or a special outing. Create a group playlist. Bring snacks. (etc)





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PART II: RESPONDING TO EMOTION IN THE MOMENT



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WHAT EMOTION MIGHT LOOK LIKE (GRIEF, ANGER, EXCITEMENT, PASSION, DISTRESS, FEAR, ETC)

- Facial changes: tears, widened or narrowed eyes, furrowed brow, wide smile
- Nervous or excessive laughter
- Shaking or cracking voice; talking much softer, more slowly, or more hesitantly than previously
- Vocalizations: throat clearing, audible breathing, sighing, snorts, "huh," "ha," "mm," "wow," etc
- Talking much louder or faster than previously
- Trembling, shaking head, or intensified stimming (ripping up paper, cracking knuckles, jiggling foot, etc)
- Tension or freezing: holding body rigidly still, visibly clenching jaw or fists, appearing speechless, etc
- Shrinking: drawing body in/curling up, bowing head, crossing arms, etc
- Tuning out: going silent, looking away or down, putting head down, etc
- Different than you expect (e.g. a wide smile may indicate fear or anger, not joy); undetectable; invisible

Note: Pay attention to what is *novel* or *intensified* about folks' body language. Stimming, speaking animatedly or softly, vocal tics like throat-clearing, etc may just be a normal part of a person's physical presence and don't necessarily indicate high emotionality. A discernible shift in behavior might.

ACKNOWLEDGE + VALIDATE

- When one or more individuals displays overt emotion, unless they are a clear danger to themselves or others in that moment, **don't panic** ("Oh my gosh! Are you okay?! Do you need a tissue?!"). Even if your intention is to provide care, having a big reaction reinforces the idea that it is not normal or really acceptable to display emotion (and that emotion needs to be dealt with/made to go away ASAP).
- At the same time: **don't freeze, ignore it, change the topic, or send the person(s) out of the room**. This may seem like the "courteous" and desired thing to do, but reflexively doing so communicates to the entire group that there is something wrong, scary, or inappropriate about reacting emotionally.
- Instead: **keep steady**. Take a few deep breaths if you need to. Maintain eye contact. Resist the urge to avert your gaze or to let it dart furtively over to the upset person(s). Keep your volume & tone regular.
- **Acknowledge** what is happening without naming people's reactions for them: "I can see that this is generating some emotion." (NOT "I can see you're upset/angry/triggered/passionate about this.")
- **Validate** it: "That's understandable." "That's okay." "This is a natural part of this work." "That's logical."

RESPOND

- If it's just one or two people: **Provide options**. "If you, or anyone else, needs to go for a walk, or just sit back from participating for a few minutes, please feel free. If you, or anyone else, wants to share anything about what you're feeling right now, we are here to listen, but you do not have to." Pause and **let them decide**. Make sure you open up the options to everyone (not just those visibly affected).
- If a number of people are perceptibly strongly affected, and/or there is heated conflict between a few participants happening: **Make an executive decision**. Take a collective break, during which people can leave the room. Pause and journal for a few minutes. After private reflection, invite, but do not mandate, sharing. Sharing can be oral/public, written, anonymous, submitted only to the facilitator, etc. **Decide if moving on from the question at hand or a deeper dive is warranted**.

FOLLOW UP

Write a note after the session has ended, either to the affected person(s) or the whole group. Acknowledge and validate the emotion that arose once again. **Express care** in whatever way you are willing to provide it: state your availability to continue the conversation, share a support resource, ask for feedback on how you handled the situation or request input on the next session, etc.