**Guidelines for Facilitating Civil Discussions on Difficult or Controversial Topics – Widener University Political Engagement Committee (Adopted Fall 2017, Modified Fall 2020)**

The following materials are organized to assist students in their training to become more effective facilitators of structured discussions on controversial issues.

**Planned Discussions on Pre-Determined Controversial Topics**

Planning a discussion on a controversial topic or issue benefits from consideration of the following topics:

* [Identifying a clear purpose](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/print/658#purpose)
* [Establishing ground rules](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/print/658#rules)
* [Providing a common base for understanding](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/print/658#base)
* [Creating a framework for the discussion that maintains focus and flow](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/print/658#framework)
* [Including everyone](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/print/658#include)
* [Being an active facilitator](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/print/658#facilitator)
* [Summarizing discussion and gathering feedback](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/print/658#summarize)

**Identifying a clear purpose**

Starting a discussion with a clearly articulated objective can help shape the nature of the discussion and link it to other desired outcomes. We will want to pre-establish some important objectives of the facilitated discussion, but also include our discussion participants in affirming these purposes.

What is the purpose of promoting civil discussions on contentious topics?

**Establishing ground rules or guidelines**

Discussion facilitators will also want to establish a clear set of ground rules for framing the discussion session. We will want to pre-establish a set of ground rules, but also engage discussion participants in the process of identifying and acknowledging them. It is important that students agree on the ground rules before discussion begins. *We prefer positive framing, rather than restrictive framing*.

Some suggestions include: (select some and simplify)

* Listen respectfully, without interrupting.
* Listen actively and with an ear to understanding others' views.
* Challenge ideas, not individuals.
* Commit to learning rather than debating. Today is for information and opinion sharing, rather than direct persuasion. (There will be time for that later)
* Allow everyone the chance to speak.
* Avoid assumptions about any member of the class or generalizations about social groups. Do not ask individuals to speak for their (perceived) social group.

**Providing a common basis for understanding**

Our facilitated discussion model centers on initially constraining discussions to select topics or themes. Our model expects that discussion sessions will follow some session presenting information about the contentious topic for discussion.

You may choose to begin the discussion by exploring the scope of prior knowledge about the topic the discussion topic and reactions to information presented in the prior session.

**Create a framework for the discussion that maintains focus and flow**

It is important to create a framework for the discussion in addition to having clearly defined objectives.  Your framework can be a guide, balancing the need to have clear purpose and direction while being open to student observations and interpretation.

We recommend developing a pre-determined array of discussion prompts, while also allowing for flexibility to match the interests of participants and to adapt to unforeseen topics from the prior session.

* Begin the discussion with clear, open-ended but bounded questions that encourage discussion.
* Encourage participants to elaborate upon their comments where needed. Probing questions can prompt participants to share more specific information, clarify an idea, elaborate on a point, or provide further explanation.
* Be prepared to re-direct the discussion if participants go beyond the intended focus.
* Recap the key discussion points or issues at the end of session

**Including everyone**

To include all students’ perspectives can be challenging in a whole group discussion, especially if students are dealing with unfamiliar or controversial material.

Some methods for increasing the number of discussants include:

* *The Round*:  Give each participants an opportunity to respond to a guiding question without interruption or comments. Provide students with the option to pass. After the round, discuss the responses.
* *Think-Pair-Share*:  Give participants a few minutes to respond to a question individually in writing. Divide the class into pairs. Instruct the participants to share their responses with group members. After a specified time period, have the group reconvene in order to debrief.  You can ask for comments on how much their pairs of views coincided or differed, or ask what questions remain after their paired discussion.

**Being an active facilitator**

In order to keep a discussion focused and purposeful, it is important to be an active facilitator rather than a passive observer. Be careful to maintain some control but not over-control. Your role as an active facilitator can include rewording questions posed by students, correcting misinformation, making reference to relevant content from the prior session, asking for clarification, and reviewing main points.

Students may expect their facilitators to express their own point of view, or they may ask explicitly for this view. In deciding how to respond, facilitators should consider their comfort in expressing personal views, and also the impact such expressions will have on this and future discussions.

**Summarizing discussion and gathering feedback**

It is very important to save time at the end of the session to summarize the main points of the discussion. Students are more likely to feel that a discussion was valuable if the facilitator, with the help of the other participants, synthesizes what has been shared or identifies the key issues explored.

You may also want to ask closing questions about their experience with facilitated discussion.

*Adapted in part from the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) at the University of Michigan. Subsequent adaptations made upon review of the “Deliberative Dialogue” module from the Project Pericles and input from numerous faculty in the Social Science Division at Widener University.*