



# Informed Discussions

## Civil and Respectful Communication, Discourse & Debate A Staff Guide

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## Articulating and Arguing Opinions

Our students are at different developmental phases and this often comes out when they're arguing their opinions.

Some may be more **dualistic**, seeing things either one way or the other, without a whole lot of grey area in between.

Others may have a more **pluralistic** view, welcoming varied viewpoints.

Whatever the case may be, we are here to help them articulate what they believe, what they're considering and what they're feeling. It's one of the best gifts we can provide.

### To Keep in Mind

In order to help them articulate – and perhaps even argue – their opinions, there are a few things to keep in mind...

**Thinking vs. Feeling.** Some students focus more on what they are *feeling* while others tend toward what they are *thinking*. Consider the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and how we all have different modes of operation, based on our preferences. So, asking a student, "What are you feeling about that?" may not have as much impact as asking, "What do you think about that?" And vice versa. If you're unsure what someone's thinking/feeling preference is, you can ask something more general like, "What's your view on that?"

**Susceptibility to Groupthink.** Depending on age, experience, self-esteem and a host of other factors, some students may be more susceptible to groupthink than others. So, if their peers that they respect are rallying around a certain political candidate, they may decide that's their candidate, too, without really examining their own personal thoughts and feelings. Sometimes that desire for belonging can override independent thought that might lead to disagreement with the group. It's important that we take a look at where students are and what might be keeping them there.

**Perceptions of "Arguments."** Making an argument is all about "expressing a point of view on a subject and supporting it with evidence," according to The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill. When the art of argument-making is put in these simple terms, it may resonate with some students, rather than thinking that "arguments" are always contentious, troubling happenings. We have to consider students' backgrounds, as they can seriously impact their perceptions. For instance, a student who grew

"Groupthink occurs when a group values harmony and coherence over accurate analysis and critical evaluation. It causes individual members of the group to unquestioningly follow the word of the leader and it strongly discourages any disagreement with the consensus."

Source: PsychologyToday.com

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up amidst constant parental arguing may crave harmony in his life and see “making an argument” as asking for trouble. Helping him see that articulating his point of view doesn’t have to be a negative action can help him better explore his own values and views.

### Questions to Ask When Helping Students Articulate Their Opinions

- How does that issue strike you?
- What does that mean to you?
- How does that impact you?
- What’s your view on \_\_\_\_\_?
- How might you explain the basic concept to someone else?
- If someone asked you for the 30-second version, what might you say?
- What about this issue is still unclear to you?
- What more would you like to learn?

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## Issues Students Face

When it comes to political, racial, religious and other issues, today's students are facing a lot of pressure – from society, peers and others – to think and behave in certain ways. These expectations and “shoulds” can interfere with their own critical reasoning skills and, sometimes, from expressing how they truly think and feel.

After all, “political correctness” is a powerful force, as is peer and group pressure. As we work with students toward the goal of having difficult conversations in civil, respectful ways, it's important for us to recognize some of the obstacles they may be facing, such as...

**Fear of Being Hated.** Hardly anyone truly *wants* to be the subject of hatred. Yet, students who take the chance to state a strong opinion that others may not agree with can be subjected to a hateful backlash.

**Anonymous Comments Online.** It's so easy for people to slander, label and threaten others online, due to anonymity and not fully considering the consequences. So, students who put themselves – and their opinions – out into cyberspace may face online cruelty.

**Threats of Physical Harm.** Expressing an unpopular opinion has led to physical harm on some campuses, sad but true. Students fearing for their safety may come to you and it's important to know what resources are available to help them feel safe where they live and study.

**Being Put on the Spot.** Just because someone has an opinion, it doesn't mean she should be expected to speak for all women or all people of her cultural or religious group.

**Going Against Group Expectations.** People in some groups may expect community solidarity. So, for instance, a gay man who doesn't express outrage when transgender people aren't allowed to use restrooms that match their gender identity could be outcast. “You're not one of us,” they may be told, being labeled as traitorous or uncaring. And group identification can be a very potent motivator.

### “Shoulds” Students May Face

- You're a black woman, so you should feel like this
- You've lived without a father, so you should feel this way toward men
- You're a lesbian, so you should look like this
- You're Jewish, so you should believe this
- You grew up in the city, so you should act like this
- You are older, so you should know better
- You're a Democrat, so you should be on this side of the issue

Encourage students to be the versions of themselves that *they* want to be, rather than always responding to societal “shoulds.” It's important that we provide support as they develop their own individual voices.

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### Understanding Microaggressions

It's a term being used a great deal on campus these days: *microaggressions*. They are more than just "insensitive comments," as they often indicate an undercurrent of racism, sexism and other social tensions that can leave students feeling marginalized, invisible and unsafe.

Learning to improve our campus climate often begins with better understanding what microaggressions are, the impact they can have, how to respond and how to reduce their occurrence. Here are five things to know...

#### 1. What They Are.

"Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group," according to author Derald Wing Sue in the book *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*.

#### Discussion Points:

- What are some examples?  
(see box, right)
- What microaggressions have you seen, heard or experienced on our campus?

#### Examples of Microaggressions

- "Nothing against you, but I don't believe gay marriage has any place in our society."
- "Has your counselor fixed you yet?"
- "Bisexual? They should call you 'trysexual' – you'll try anything."
- "How did you get a C – you're Asian!"
- "Do you really think you should eat that?"
- "You're very pretty for a black girl."
- "Hello, girls!" (to a group of women)
- Exploring case studies in class or during a training session where all the names sound "white"

#### 2. Who Commits Them.

"Anyone can commit a microaggression and everyone can be harmed by a microaggression," said Dr. Maura Cullen during a webinar on "Microaggressions: A Campus Climate Conversation" (PaperClip Communications, 9/30/15).

#### Discussion Points:

- Can a well-meaning person commit a microaggression?
- Who might be harmed by some of the examples we explored previously? How might these words impact them?

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#### 3. When They Occur.

“Each event, observation and experience... is not necessarily particularly striking in and of themselves. Often, they are never meant to hurt – acts done with little conscious awareness of their meanings and effects. Instead, their slow accumulation during a childhood and over a lifetime is in part what defines a marginalized experience, making explanation and communication with someone who does not share this identity particularly difficult. Social others are microaggressed hourly, daily, weekly, monthly,” according to the *Microaggressions: Power, Privilege, and Everyday Life* blog.

#### Discussion Points:

- How can the constancy of microaggressions impact someone?
- How might the setting in which a microaggression takes place impact someone’s action, reaction or inaction?

“Microaggressions are remarks perceived as sexist, racist, or otherwise offensive to a marginalized social group.”

— Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7/9/15

#### 4. What They Do.

“Microaggressions are constant and continuing experiences of marginalized groups in our society; they assail the self-esteem of recipients, produce anger and frustration, deplete psychic energy, lower feelings of subjective well-being and worthiness, produce physical health problems, shorten life expectancy, and deny minority populations equal access and opportunity in education, employment, and health care,” wrote Wing Sue.

#### Discussion Points:

- How might you react when someone says, “It’s not a big deal,” even though it IS a big deal to you?
- If you commit a microaggression and it is brought to your attention, how might you react?

#### 5. Impact vs. Intent.

“Impact always trumps intent,” explained Cullen.

#### Discussion Points:

- How can we be more aware of the microaggressions we commit, even if it’s not our intent?
- Do you tend to “write off” people who commit microaggressions? Why or why not?

**Sources:** *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7/9/15; “Microaggressions” webinar, PaperClip Communications, 9/30/15; *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* by Derald Wing Sue, 2010; [Microaggressions.com](http://Microaggressions.com)

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## Avoiding Condescension

Go on, admit it. You likely get supremely bugged when someone acts condescendingly toward you. So, chances are that you don't want to do the same when talking with others.

Acting in a patronizing, condescending way is one sure method for stopping productive, civil discourse in its tracks. If others sense that you feel superior to them and are talking down to them, why would they seek you out? And why would they be civil? That type of disdain, whether intended or not, can shut things down in an instant.

So, it's good for all of us to take a look at what might be perceived as condescending. We won't do it perfectly, yet awareness can tweak the odds in our favor as we work to be more encouraging than discouraging.

“Of what use is it to be tolerant of others if you are convinced that you are right and everyone who disagrees with you is wrong? That isn't tolerance but condescension.”

— Anthony de Mello, *The Way to Love*

### Phrases That Could be Considered Condescending

- » Let me put it in simpler terms for you
- » Oh, yeah, I already thought of that
- » You just figured that out?
- » You need to remember that...
- » I don't need all the details – just cut to the chase
- » Are you sure that's a good idea?
- » Let me show you how it's done

### More Encouraging Phrasing

- » I sometimes like to break it down like this
- » What a great thought!
- » Looks like you've got it figured out
- » It's good for all of us to remember that...
- » What's the main point you'd like us to consider?
- » I trust that you've given it a lot of good thought
- » I'd be glad for us to work on this together