Facilitating Civil Discourse in the Classroom

Be Curious
Be Charitable
Be Conscientious
Be Constructive

Civil Discourse for Citizenship
CENTER FOR ETHICS AND HUMAN VALUES

Listen. Learn. Discuss.
SKILLS FOR CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

Teaching After SB 1

Many members of The Ohio State University community are considering whether SB 1 requires changes in their classroom instruction. This guide from the Center for Ethics and Human Values (CEHV) aims to give instructors confidence and resources to ensure that their discussions with students reflect the mission of the University by being open, rigorous, and constructive. Most, if not all, instructors already teach in this spirit, but some might welcome a framework to set expectations and navigate discussions in their classrooms.

What this guide cannot provide:

- Legal advice about the requirements of SB 1
- Authoritative statements about university policy or the formal complaints process
- Advice for co-curricular events or programming outside the classroom

What this guide can provide:

- Resources for your syllabus and students
- Pedagogical guidance to support constructive discussion on controversial topics
- Confidence in handling difficult discussions

Unversity Guidance on Intellectual Diversity

The University has provided guidance on the rights and responsibilities of instructors under SB 1 at the following website: https://compliance.osu.edu/focus-areas/sb1/intellectual-diversity . This guidance includes topics such as the appropriate exercise of professional judgment within an instructor's discipline, support for intellectual diversity, allowing students to reach their own conclusions on controversial topics, the assessment of student performance, and managing classroom disruptions.

Intellectual Diversity – Syllabus Statement

The University website also provides a statement on intellectual diversity for instructors to include in their syllabi. CEHV recommends adding these sentences:

> "In this course we will adhere to the 4Cs of civil discourse: **Be Curious, Be Charitable, Be Conscientious, and Be Constructive**. To acquaint yourself with this framework, please visit Ohio State's Center for Ethics and Human Values website: go.osu.edu/4Cs."

The 4Cs of Civil Discourse

CEHV encourages instructors to adopt the 4Cs — **Be Curious, Be Charitable, Be Conscientious, and Be Constructive** — as a framework for engaging in civil discourse in their classrooms. Some features of this framework:

- It was developed in 2019-2020 with significant input from Ohio State students themselves.
- It helps instructors to be explicit about their commitment to open, rigorous, and constructive discussion.
- It provides language for clear and consistent communication with students about course expectations and the instructors' approach to course material
- Because the 4Cs framework is being utilized in a wide range of CEHV's **civil discourse programming** in support of ***Listen. Learn. Discuss.***, this language will resonate with what many students are hearing elsewhere.

What is Civil Discourse?

Civil discourse is the practice of deliberating about matters of public concern with others in a way that seeks to expand knowledge and promote understanding. The word "civil" doesn't refer to civility, in the sense of mere politeness, but to civic, in the sense of being oriented toward public life. Civil discourse aims to develop mutual respect, build civic trust, and identify common ground on matters of public concern.

Civil discourse is an essential part, but only one part, of democratic citizenship: it complements but doesn't replace bargaining and direct action. However civil discourse is the aspect of democratic citizenship that universities are almost uniquely designed to promote. Indeed, many of the privileges that universities enjoy, such as the principle of academic freedom, are granted with the understanding that they are necessary for expanding knowledge and promoting understanding.

Civil discourse requires that we acknowledge that the truth can be many-sided and elusive: we often disagree about what key concepts mean, how to evaluate the relevant evidence, and how to weigh competing values against each other. Civil discourse therefore requires that we embrace the principles of fallibilism – that we sometimes, or even often, get things wrong – and pluralism – that people of good will often reach different conclusions. Fallibilism isn't the same thing as skepticism, and pluralism isn't the same thing as relativism: we can admit that our current beliefs may be wrong and our current disagreements hard to resolve and still be committed to seeking better understanding and greater agreement. Indeed, civil discourse is an essential tool for pursuing each of those aims.

Civil discourse also requires that we subject our beliefs and values to criticism. It can therefore make us feel uncomfortable, threatened, or even angry. It's important to keep in mind that being criticized isn't the same thing as being silenced, and that questioning someone's beliefs isn't the same thing as questioning their right to hold or defend them. Moreover, avoiding or being sheltered from ideas that challenge or offend us can be detrimental to ourselves and our community. Having our beliefs challenged is a necessary condition for improving our understanding, and engaging in civil discourse is a necessary condition for building the knowledge, skills, and relationships that make a flourishing democracy possible. A political community whose citizens are unwilling or unable to engage constructively across lines of disagreement doesn't have a healthy or sustainable civic culture.

That doesn't mean that anything goes. Speech that doesn't aim at expanding knowledge or promoting understanding, but rather at shutting down discussion, provoking a reaction, or deliberately confusing the issue has no place in civil discourse. Neither does speech that undermines or calls into question the ability of some people or groups to participate as equals in public life. Such speech free-rides on the norms of civil discourse instead of embodying them. Of course, it will often be a matter of debate whether these norms have been violated in a given case, and this question may itself become a topic to be taken up in civil discourse.

Setting up the Conversation

Civil discourse involves explaining and critically examining our beliefs and values with others who may disagree with us. As mentioned, it is important to recognize that having our beliefs challenged during civil discourse isn't the same as being silenced and that questioning the truth of someone's beliefs isn't the same as questioning their right to hold them. Setting the stage for civil discourse requires understanding its goal:

> *Goal of Civil Discourse - to gain a better understanding of a topic or of someone else's perspective by engaging in an inquiry together*

Civil discourse is only possible when participants share this goal, recognizing that the aim is not to win, discredit an opposing viewpoint, or take someone down.

Communicate the goal to the students:

"We are here to learn by engaging in inquiry together." To promote civil discourse, try to frame the discussion as an "inquiry dialogue"—be careful not to conflate it with other important dialogue types, including negotiation, direct instruction, debate, or empathetic care.

Goals	Types of Dialogue
Sharing the burden of holding onto weighty emotions	Empathetic Care
Achieving cathartic release	Eristic Dialogue
Persuading someone or a group to accept your belief	Debate
Deciding on a course of action	Deliberation
Resolving conflicting interests	Negotiation
Imparting knowledge	Direct Instruction
Collaboratively searching for answers to shared questions	Inquiry Dialogue

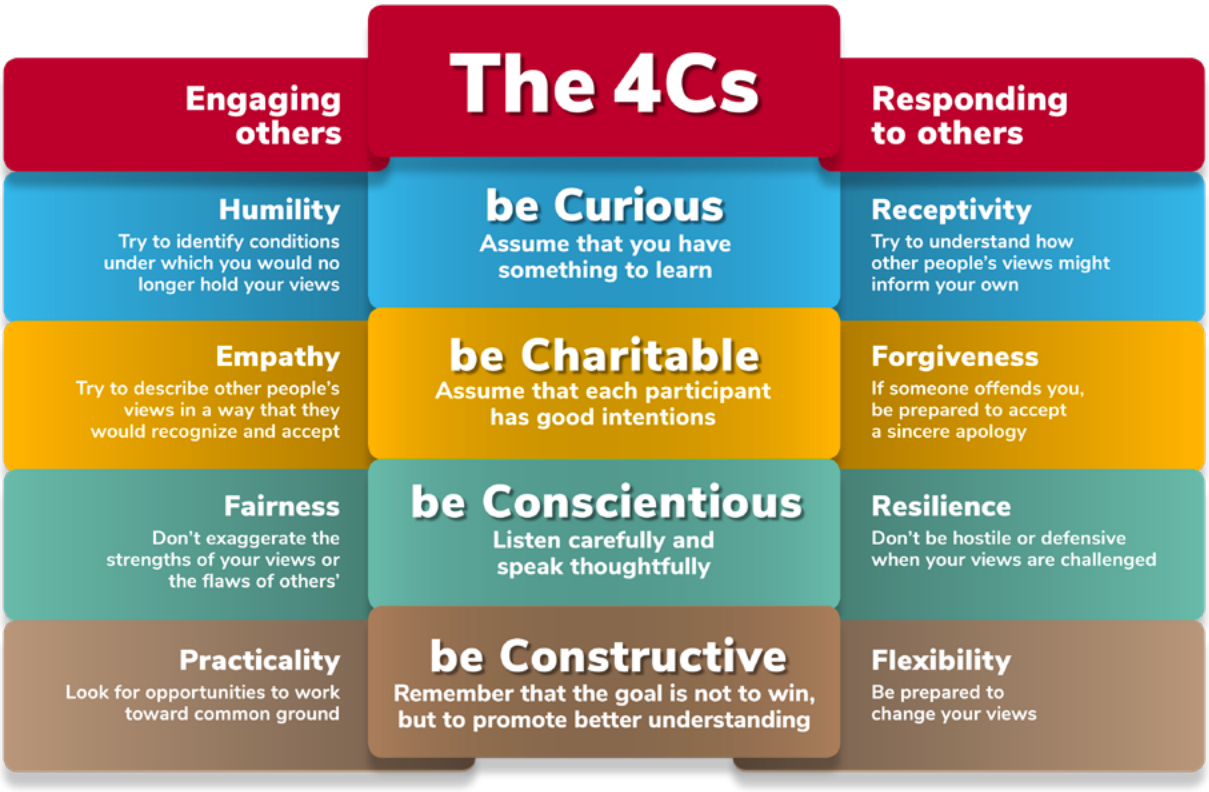
Ask questions that are:

- **Central** – focused on an important topic, debate, experience, etc.
- **Common** – accessible and relevant to all participants
- **Contestable** – open to reasonable disagreement

It is important that all participants be clear on the issue or question under consideration. Otherwise, we run the risk of talking past one another, which can result in frustration and misunderstanding rather than progress. For example, rather than inviting discussion on a broad, multi-faceted topic like "abortion," ask specific questions like, "Should laws regulating abortion access be determined by states?"

Engaging in Civil Discourse

The 4Cs aim to create an environment in which people: (1) remain open to others' perspectives, even as they share their own, by being ***curious*** and ***charitable***; (2) navigate disagreements fairly and productively by being ***conscientious*** and ***constructive***.



Be Curious

Being curious means assuming you have something to learn from people who disagree with you. Respond with curiosity by reminding yourself that you might not yet know what someone means or why they hold their view. Invite them to explain their view, and ask questions, listening to truly understand rather than to prepare a rebuttal. While this may sound easy, pausing in this state of ambivalence and then seeking to learn against a backdrop of disagreement is quite challenging—both emotionally and cognitively.

Listening with curiosity doesn't mean you must constantly second-guess all your values and beliefs. It means being open to the idea that some of your views could change in some way, even if those changes are just about the reasons or beliefs of those with whom you disagree.

Cultivate curiosity by recognizing that the truth can be complex and that we often get things wrong. Scrutinizing our beliefs from different perspectives helps us develop our own thinking, correct misunderstandings, recalibrate our values, and form better beliefs. Keep in mind that intelligent people of good will often disagree about what key concepts mean, how to evaluate relevant evidence, and how to weigh competing values against each other.

Tips for the classroom

- Ask students to write down what they want to learn before the discussion begins.
- Collaboratively identify different positions or points of view one could take on the issue under discussion. Work together to come up with reasons why someone might endorse each position. Consider reasons for rejecting each position.
- Ask a student to summarize a point that you or another student made in their own words (don't let them just repeat it back in the same language). This challenges them to consider whether they really understand and helps them identify questions they might still have.
- When students disagree with claim from a reading, don't just ask why they disagree—ask them to consider why someone might think it is true. If they agree with it, ask why someone might reject it.

Be Charitable

Being charitable means assuming others have good intentions. People often feel nervous when talking about contentious issues because they are worried about saying the wrong thing, leading to hostile responses or being negatively perceived. We can help others feel more comfortable by being charitable in our interpretation of their words. Let others in the conversation know that you will give them the benefit of the doubt when interpreting their statements and motives—especially if they say something that seems offensive or harmful. It's important to focus on understanding what others are saying, regardless of whether you think they are right or wrong. Demonstrate charity by summarizing what someone else has said in your own words until they agree that you've got it right.

Being charitable involves showing empathy for others by considering how their perspectives are connected to their lived experiences, which might be very different from yours. If you find it difficult to empathize with people who disagree with you about an issue, think about the experiences and circumstances that influence your view on that issue. Then, try to imagine circumstances and experiences that would lead you to hold a different view on it.

Keep in mind that people who disagree with you are also emotionally attached to their deeply held beliefs. When someone expresses a belief that conflicts with yours, don't assume that they intended to upset you. Consider the possibility that, for them, expressing it was a way of being true to themselves.

Recognize that harm can occur without wrongdoing. When someone inadvertently upsets you by misunderstanding you or expressing a view that conflicts with yours, be

prepared to accept a sincere apology that expresses regret for the negative emotional impact, even if you disagree about whether they did something wrong.

When talking about political issues like abortion, crime, inflation, or immigration, there will be times when others fail to appreciate something that matters deeply to you, such as facts about a particular community or the implications of using specific terminology. Instead of becoming defensive or shutting down, give them the benefit of the doubt by inviting them to understand your perspective.

Tips for the classroom

- Reconstruct arguments or ideas from readings in the most charitable way possible.
- Ask students who disagree to summarize one another's views, clarifying and rephrasing until the other student agrees that it is an accurate, complete description of their view.
- Explicitly compare different possible interpretations and discuss which is most charitable.
- Ask students to consider how a difference in background might lead someone to a different view.
- Remind students to give each other the benefit of the doubt, especially when someone says something offensive.
- Introduce terminology so students can express their ideas without worrying that they will use the wrong words—it can be hard to give someone the benefit of the doubt when they use language that some find offensive or that has negative associations/ hidden meanings.

Be Conscientious

Being conscientious means reasoning responsibly when making and evaluating arguments. Consider the merits of arguments for different political positions rather than rejecting or accepting them based on your feelings about them or desire for them to be true or false.

Fairly evaluate evidence/reasoning for the views you agree with and the views you disagree with. Resist the temptation to pay attention to evidence that supports your beliefs while ignoring evidence that challenges them. Common ways of misrepresenting evidence include:

- Oversimplifying evidence or presenting it as clear-cut, ignoring complexities
- Using hyperbole or exaggerating what evidence shows, presenting things in terms of extremes
- Relying on false background assumptions, like assuming that there are only two viable policy options when there could be others

Recognize that in these discussions your beliefs and values will be questioned and challenged – and prepare to be resilient instead of defensive. Try to view challenges to your perspective as opportunities to learn from people who disagree with you,

gain a better understanding of why you disagree, and examine your own reasons for your beliefs. Explain your reasoning in ways that are responsive to others' reasons for disagreeing or taking a different position. Keep in mind that we can question the truth of someone's beliefs without questioning their right to hold them.

Tips for the classroom

- Explicitly tell students that all views expressed in class will be critically examined.
- Be sure to hold everyone to the same standard—it can be easy to accept poor reasoning or exaggerated evidence for views we accept while holding students who disagree to a higher standard.
- Challenge arguments, not people, even when discussing readings.
- Be precise when making claims.
- Explicitly consider options for understanding ambiguities.

  Example: "The author's argument fails" could mean that the author's conclusion is false, or that it is unsupported whether or not it is true.
- Be conscious of how different social positions or formal roles might affect the uptake of arguments within class discussion.
- Ask students to diagnose whether a disagreement is primarily about competing values or about competing understandings of the facts.
- Invite students to offer views for the sake of argument or to "test" them, regardless of whether they accept them—then defensiveness won't be their natural response.
- Discuss good sources of evidence and reasoning skills.

Be Constructive

Being constructive means staying focused on the goal of fostering greater understanding. Use that goal to evaluate the productivity of the conversation. Remember that civil discourse isn't about convincing anyone to endorse your position. Civil discourse is a success when participants gain a better understanding of the issue being discussed, the diversity of positions on that issue, and the strength of the evidence related to those positions. If you find yourself or an interlocuter deviating from the goal, take a step back to acknowledge that and see if you can find a way to return to civil discourse.

Don't assume that people in a different political party or on the opposite side of an issue have different underlying values. When we disagree about a policy, we should explore the values and reasons underlying the disagreement. Some political disagreements occur because people who hold the same values disagree about the relative weight or implications of those values in certain policy areas. Alternatively, people who hold different values may favor the same policy but for different reasons. Often, different values can support the same policy conclusions.

Don't assume that people who disagree about an issue are uninformed or misinformed. Discuss the relevant empirical evidence for your opposing positions. If your

disagreement is about empirical facts, consider why you disagree about them. Are you drawing evidence from different sources? Are you drawing on the same evidence but interpreting it differently?

Engaging in constructive dialogue means being intellectually, emotionally, and practically prepared to change your mind. Even if you don't end up endorsing a different position, you might change your mind about the strength of argument for or against your position or the rationale or motives behind opposing positions. Remind students that learning from one another and working toward reasonable answers to important questions is the main goal.

Tips for the classroom

- Ask students to consider what they have gained through discussion or engagement with a different view.
- Call attention to important developments in the discussion as they happen.

  Examples: Students might articulate a more nuanced version of the question being discussed, or express a richer sense of the diversity of viewpoints held by different participants, or appreciate a more complex understanding of the evidence that relates to different viewpoints.
- Highlight points of agreement and disagreement.
- Identify concrete points of agreement that are consistent with underlying disagreements.

  Example: Students may agree that we should adopt a policy while disagreeing about why we should adopt it.
- Determine whether disagreements are about facts or values—ask students to identify values at stake and what facts are relevant to the question.
- Identify and address issues that are impeding progress in class discussions.

  Examples: If students are using different definitions or interpretations of a term or concept, pause to clarify. If students are struggling to engage productively—withdrawing or responding combatively or defensively—pivot to a discussion about why the topic is so difficult to talk about and how to address those challenges in class.
- Wrap up discussions by taking stock of the progress that's been made.

  Examples: Identify any new questions that have arisen, any points where participants have changed their minds, any weaknesses in arguments that have been identified, and any disagreements that have been clarified.

Learn More about The 4Cs and Civil Discourse

Teaching Endorsement: "Ethical Disagreement and Civil Discourse"

A **4-session instructor training program** hosted by CEHV through the Drake Institute. Participants learn and share strategies for navigating disagreement and difficult conversations in the classroom. Focus is on the 4Cs, how to frame questions, and common barriers to fruitful discussion of ethical issues. 29 instructors and program directors participated in Spring 2025. It will be offered both semesters in 2025-2026.

Tailored Small Group Workshops

CEHV offers three types of workshops to student, staff, and faculty groups upon request:

1. Introduction to the 4Cs of civil discourse
2. Facilitated dialogues on a topic challenging a group
3. Introduction to the Shared Values

During 2024-2025, CEHV led 52 group workshops all across campus. As autumn semester approaches, we plan to offer some stand-alone sessions for instructors. Visit cehv.osu.edu for information.

Online 4Cs Training Program

CEHV has developed a **free, self-paced online introduction to the 4Cs** with exercises and videos. Students, staff, and faculty may also access it through Carmen – whole classes have done so. Simply contact us to be enrolled. This could also be linked to in a syllabus.

Opportunities for Your Students

Encourage students to take ARTSCCI 2400/2400E, a unique 3-credit course that introduces students to debates about free speech & civil discourse and trains them in dialogue facilitation skills. Students might also choose to enroll in the 4-course academic certificate "Civil Discourse for Citizenship." See more at **go.osu.edu/discourse**.

Questions?

Contact Civil Discourse Program Director Kathryn Joyce (**joyce.173@osu.edu**)

Civil Discourse for Citizenship

CENTER FOR ETHICS AND HUMAN VALUES