

# Eruptions & Transformations: Navigating Hot Moments and Other Barriers to Conversations Across Difference

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**Workshop on Friday, Feb. 19, 2021 by**  
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**Workshop Goal:** To develop instructional strategies for successfully navigating barriers to conversations across difference

**Outcomes:** By the end of this workshop, you should be able to:

- Describe strategies for fostering a supportive learning environment, where both students and instructors are more open to engage in conversations across, and about, difference. (BEFORE)
- Utilize strategies one can use during hot moments to transform eruptions into learning opportunities. (DURING)
- Summarize strategies one can take after a hot moment to ensure learning. (AFTER)

What is communication climate?

- It is the emotional tone of the communication context.
- It's the negotiated characteristics of a communication context that are influenced by, and influence, communicative interactions.

What communication characteristics lead to a **supportive** communication climate?

- Clarity
- Equality
- Engagement
- Description
- Personal

Research (Myers & Rocca. 2001; Pierce, 1994; Souza, Dallimore, Pilling, & Aoki, 2010; Souza, 1999) suggests that communication climate impacts:

- Engagement
- Participation
- Motivation
- Resistance to learning
- Comfort
- Learning
- Retention

**What are some strategies to take BEFORE difficult moments may arise while teaching?**

## **Creating a Supportive Communication Climate: Clarity**

1. Be intentional & TRANSPARENT as a teacher.
  - Clarify expectations for students in syllabi.
    - Participation, due dates, technology use, missed/late exams/assignments, grading, etc.
    - Clarify and model expectations on the first day of class.
2. Communicate in a clear manner.
  - Simple to complex, familiar to unfamiliar
  - Link to and/or question students' prior knowledge.

- Ask what troublesome notions students are likely to hold and then design questions & instruction that challenges each one progressively (Bain, 2004).
  - Avoid information overload, especially now.
    - How quickly are you introducing new concepts?
    - Can you do more with less?
  - Congruence: Make your verbal and non-verbal communication congruent.
3. Make your messages complete, specific, and explicit.
- Anticipate where there might be resistance or strong reactions and name it.
    - “You might find it difficult to talk about immigration given what is going on in our nation right now.”
  - Ask “What questions do you have?” and increase wait time.
    - Wait time increases: student responses, speculative thinking, number of questions asked by students, variety of students volunteering in discussions, student confidence and student achievement.
    - Try waiting AT LEAST 5 seconds.
  - Check back to clarify; restate to confirm.
    - Metacommunicate.
      - For example, “If I am hearing you correctly, you did not understand...”

“The best professors tended to use warm language, to be explicit, to be complete, and to tell the story and make the explanation” (Bain, 2004, p. 122).

**Reflection Question:** How could you be more clear about your expectations and/or content in the future?

#### **Creating a Supportive Communication Climate: Equality**

1. Encourage people to take responsibility for responses and actions.
  - Everyone owns the learning community.
2. Focus on and recognize the positive aspects of students’ contributions.
3. Follow and use energy of group rather than resist. Be willing to be influenced.
4. Co-create agreed upon group agreements for effective participation (see page 13-14). Group agreements help to:
  - Clarify expectations.
  - Create a sense of ownership for the learning community.
  - Create a safer climate.
  - Provide opportunities for feedback.

#### **Creating a Supportive Communication Climate: Engagement**

1. Utilize active learning (Freeman, 2014).
  - Vary your teaching methods & formats.
  - Keep lectures to 12 minutes (online and FTF).
  - Move around the room and have them move too (when not in a pandemic!).
2. Encourage student participation. Give students opportunities to talk.
  - Through questions
  - Through responses
  - Through interaction with other students
    - Research suggests that when students interact with one another in a cooperative way, achievement increases, student attitudes toward learning are more positive, and self-esteem and motivation increase.
  - Consider cold calling but always give right to pass.
3. Create a safe climate for expression of feelings and differing viewpoints.

- Allow for the classroom to be a testing ground (drafting ideas and ways to talk about them).
- Emphasize that we are ALL on a lifelong journey.
- Have discussions that are less threatening early on to build confidence.
- Go meta to encourage reflection on discussions & community building.

#### General Guidelines for Encouraging Interaction:

- Ask follow up questions: "Why?" "Do you agree?" "Can you elaborate?" "Tell me more." "Can you give an example?"
- Build on contributions. Use student responses to build other questions and draw out further information: "Good point Sarita. How do you think that relates to our discussion of X earlier?"
- Reflect questions directed to you back to the group: "That's an interesting question. Can anyone help us out?" or "That's a good question. Does anyone have an idea?"
- Ask for student summary: "Could you please summarize Dominic's point?"
- Survey the group: "How many people agree with this point?"
- Allow for student calling: "Hee Ray, would you please call on someone else?"
- Ask students to unpack their thinking: "Describe how you arrived at your answer?"
- Cue student responses: "There is not a single correct answer for this question. I want you to consider alternatives."

#### **Creating a Supportive Communication Climate: Description**

1. Frame student behavior in terms of observations not judgments.
  - Ex: "Your test scores were terrible."
  - Rewrite?
2. Use positive language.
  - Ex: "Don't make foolish mistakes or you'll fail the test."
  - Rewrite?

#### **Creating a Supportive Communication Climate: Personal Communication**

1. Recognize your students as individuals and learners.
  - Get to know names. (consider using name tents with pronouns if FTF or ensure that all names and pronouns are visible on zoom, etc.).
  - Ask students what their goals are for the course (easily done in a google form). What do they hope to achieve and what would make the class valuable for them?
  - Build trust and community.
    - a. Engage in small talk (will be harder in these times) and relationship/trust building with your students.
    - b. Do easy activities that allow students to share who they are and what they are after in the course.
  - Ask for and give feedback.
  - Ask students how they feel about things.
2. Give students the chance to get to know you.
  - Examples, brief stories
  - Own journey w/ content
3. Uses terms like "we" and "us" to refer to the class.
4. Demonstrate immediacy: perception of physical and psychological closeness between communicators.
  - Vocal expressiveness, smiling, gestures, eye contact, movement, relaxed body position

#### Immediacy in the Classroom: Research and Practical Implications

Immediacy is Positively Correlated with:

- Student affect and affective learning (Gorham, 1988; many others, across cultures; recent: Pogue & AhYun, 2006), even in large classes (Messman & Jones-Corley, 2001), and even when workload demands are high (Mottet, Parker-Raley, Cunningham, Beebe, & Raffeld, 2006)
- Student cognitive learning (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Christophel, 1990; Kelley & Gorham, 1988; Titsworth, 2001), though a smaller relationship was found than for affective learning.
- Perceived instructor competence, caring and trustworthiness (Thweatt, 1999)
- Positive student evaluations (Moore, Masterson, Christophel, & Shea, 1996)
- Student state motivation (Christophel, 1990; Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Frymier, 1994)
- Attitude and background homophily with instructors (Rocca & McCroskey, 1999)
- Interpersonal attraction (all 3 forms: task, physical, and social attraction), (Rocca & McCroskey, 1999)
- Perceived teacher assertiveness and responsiveness (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994)
- Student attendance and participation (Rocca, 2004)
- Out-of-class communication between professors and students (Jaasma & Koper, 1999)

Immediacy is Negatively Correlated with:

- Verbal aggression (Rocca & McCroskey, 1999)
- Student resistance (Kearney, Plax, Smith & Sorensen, 1988)

**Reflection Question:** How supportive is the communication climate in your classes? What steps, if any, will you take to improve the communication climate? What difference could it make?

### What do I do if students are resistant to the themes in the readings and/or class discussions?

Recognize what student resistance looks like:

- Denial
- Stealing back the center/shifting attention back to self or dominant ways of thinking
- Attempts to discredit sources
- Assertions that the dominant group has a market on the truth
- Playing the victim card
- Silence due to fear of offending/angering/being tokenized

Explore the sources of student resistance:

1. **Cognitive dissonance:** Information is counter to their beliefs (e.g., I'm/the nation is not racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.).
2. **Cognitive simplification:** Oversimplification and dualistic thinking are a common feature of the learning process (e.g., "people are bad", "things won't change") as a way to shut down further reflection/avoid discomfort (Chick, Karis, & Kernahan, 2009, p. 9).
3. **Fragility:** "a state in which even a minimal amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54).
4. **Belief in "isms" as individual acts.** According to Winkler (2017), "racism as a system of advantage based on race is *the* concept students must truly 'get' in order to move forward in the class" (p. 1-2). Challenges to accepting this threshold concept include:
  - a. Individualism
  - b. Belief in meritocracy—"psychological necessity" for those w/ privilege
  - c. Socialized to think U.S. is just
5. **Decentering:** When someone with privilege who is usually at the center of the dominant narrative, feels uncomfortable with a new narrative and no longer feels at the center.
6. **Topic taboo**
7. **Blame/guilt:** Can lead to backlash, not learning or attitude change (Moss-Racusin, van der Toorn, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, Handelsman, 2014).
8. **Fear**
9. **Discomfort**

### **What are the top 20 strategies to mitigate/address student resistance?**

1. Ask questions to unpack assumptions.
2. Utilize stories/narrative (both oral and written) to increase empathy and comprehension (Kernahan, in press).
  - Reading fiction can decrease prejudice as readers take on the perspective of someone who is different (Djikic & Oatley, 2014).
3. Accept that learning is not a linear process.
4. Encourage listening and acceptance.
  - People have a legitimate claim to what is true and real for them.
  - Encourage the use of course guidelines.
5. Emphasize the importance of intersectionality and how individuals have privileged and oppressed identities simultaneously.
  - Students being able to claim their own disadvantage via less privileged identities seems to validate and affirm students and leads to less resistance and more recognition of privilege in other areas (Wise & Case, 2013).
6. Affirms students' sense of self.
  - Self affirmation theory (Cohen & Sherman, 2014) suggests that when we feel a threat to self, we constrict our view. Self affirmation in the face of threat allows students to see a bigger picture.
  - Self affirmation early in the semester has the potential to shape how students perceive all the content that follows (Kernahan, in press).
7. Own (and share, if appropriate) your own areas of privilege and disadvantage.
8. Help students move beyond an individual understanding of privilege and discrimination to one that is more systemic.
9. Encourage recognition of harms to everyone when society is inequitable and oppression exists.
10. Focus on responsibility not blame.
  - Interventions to reduce bias can increase prejudice due to participants feeling blamed for their own bias and prejudice (Moss-Racusin, van der Toorn, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman, 2014).
11. Encourage a sense of belonging and student-student interactions in your class.
  - Research (Kernahan, Zheng, & Davis, 2014) suggests a strong link between sense of classroom belonging and student learning. Overall course belonging correlated specifically with increased awareness of racial privilege and discrimination, student's perceptions of their own learning, and average grade for key assignments.
  - Utilize various active learning strategies that allow for reflection and lower-stakes participation before whole-class discussion (Kernahan, in press).
  - Research suggests that courses using structured discussion leads to stronger learning outcomes than a more lecture-based course (Chick, Karis, & Kernahan, 2009).
12. Recognize and honor similarities as well as differences among people.
13. Be genuine and authentic---own areas of bias.
14. Discuss common reactions and anticipate (and possibly name nature and source of) resistance.
15. Consider having students reflect on their own social identity development.
16. Encourage thinking as well as feeling.
  - Share and normalize common feelings students will experience in class.
17. Build relationships and environments that allow risk taking.
  - Encourage students to become more comfortable with discomfort.
  - Encourage a growth mindset (we learn and grow from mistakes).
18. Be patient and encourage patience.
  - Allow other students to weigh in on student comments.

19. Be transparent about your goals and rationale for discussions, assignments, and activities (Kernahan, in press).
  - “Unfairness is one of the most common precursors of student resistance, dissent, and negative feelings toward an instructor” (Kernahan, in press) and can be minimized with transparency and clear rubrics.
20. When a student makes an “unproductive” comment (out of resistance), ask the student how they are feeling or why they felt it important to make that particular statement (Kernahan, in press). Can ask if other students are feeling the same.
  - It might be that other students are having similar reactions which can normalize their feelings and possibly increase sense of belonging which will help them in dealing with dissonance.

#### **How can I maintain a supportive communication climate with disruptive students/behaviors?**

- Balance between too little and too much attention. Limit person’s impact.
- Move from indirect to more direct tactics.
- Don’t get caught in power struggles.
- Acknowledge them to diffuse anger.
- Make every attempt to save face of difficult student. Connect.
- Use good-natured humor.

#### **What are some principles to keep in mind to help de-escalate? (adapted from George Thompson)**

1. All people want to be treated w/ dignity and respect
2. All people want to be asked rather than told to do something
3. All people want to be told why they are getting asked to do something
4. All people want to be given options rather than threats
5. Everyone wants a second chance.

#### **What are some strategies to take DURING difficult moments while teaching? (Souza, 2016; Souza, Vizenor, Sherlip & Raser, 2016)**

##### **In general:**

- View challenge as a teachable moment and an opportunity for you, and others, to learn.
- Appear calm (if you need to pause at length, do so. It can give students time to reflect on the interaction as well).
- Ask clarifying questions that help to define the issue.
  - "I want to make sure that I understand what you are saying. Were you saying that...?"
- Listen carefully and model effective response strategies.
- Be aware of your nonverbals as well as the students’ nonverbals.
- Come from a spirit of generosity; never attribute to malice what can be attributed to ignorance.
  - Implicit bias is real for all of us
  - We all have areas of ignorance

##### **Monopolizing**

- Use small groups or pairs.
- Summarize the student’s viewpoint, then move on.
- Preface questions with, “Could someone tell me in two sentences or less . . .”
- Ask others for their input.
- Remind the class of the group agreements.

- Thank the student for her/his comments and ask if they wouldn't mind holding off until a break due to time.

### **Tangents**

- Summarize the students' viewpoint, then move on.
- Address directly the fact that a different topic has been raised—"That seems to be different issue"—and restate the purpose of the discussion, asking for input from others.

### **Private Conversations**

- Use nonverbal methods to gain the students' attention (make eye contact, move closer).
- Lower your voice or pause.
- Ask one of the students a question (stating their name BEFORE you ask the question).
- Ask the students if they have something they want to contribute.
- Ask the students to refrain from talking (privately, if possible)

### **Distractions**

- Use nonverbal signals, such as eye contact, to get student's attention.
- Ignore the behavior if it is not distracting from the lesson.
- Ask the students to stop using a communication tool.

### **Disagreeing**

- Present hard data in a respectful manner.
- Summarize the student's viewpoint; ask others for their opinions.
- Recognize the importance of valuing multiple perspectives.
- Agree to disagree.
- Agree in part, then state how you differ and why.

### **When someone is clearly offended by a comment:**

- Inquire about what led to the offense.
  - "Tell me more what is going on for you..."
  - "What upset you about...?"
  - "What does that comment bring up for you?"

### **When a student is reacting out of cumulative impact:**

- Name that this might be happening.
  - "It appears that you are having a strong reaction to X. Would you like to talk about it?"
  - "My guess is that this is an example of what has happened to you a lot in the past."
  - "It's clear that something is going on here for you. Is there anything I can do to be supportive of you?"

### **If personally triggered:**

- If appropriate, use self-disclosure to name why triggered.
- Share feelings and test to see if some students are feeling triggered as well.
- Move into deeper dialogue by asking the student questions to gain further understanding or open up the dialogue to the rest of the group by inviting them to respond to the student's comment. (See suggestions above)

### **If a student acts hostile toward you during class:**

- Ask yourself if you've done anything to contribute to the hostility.
- Try not to take attacks personally or become defensive.

- Try to find common ground (“I know we both care deeply about ...”) without changing the nature of the issue.
- Focus on your interest in learning (yours and students).
- Use **I statements** to address the concern, which allows you to own the problem and gives the student an easy opportunity to save face.

**If the situation escalates:**

- Remain calm and request compliance from the student in concrete terms (e.g., "please lower your voice" or "please sit in your chair").
- Acknowledge the emotions of the student ("I understand you are upset").
- Seek to regain some control of the academic setting yet not disgrace anyone in front of his/her peers.
- Convey your interest and concern to the student. Take a non-defensive stance to try to understand where the student is coming from.
- If the student refuses to comply, remind student of group agreements, policy 2050, and/or the student code of conduct.
- If the student continues to refuse to comply, either dismiss class or leave the academic setting to call for assistance or ask someone else to enlist the help of others. Be specific regarding who you want called/contacted.
- If a student is violent or threatening, remove yourself and instruct others to remove themselves from the situation and summon campus police as quickly as possible.
- Have a safety plan in case of violent or dangerous behavior. The plan may include dismissing class, contacting campus police, etc.
- Don't take students' behavior personally. Understand that they are coming into the course with their own personal history and issues at an incredibly volatile time.
- Contact the Dean of Students.
- Document disruptive behavior. Include name of student, date and time of incident, describe incident in descriptive, behavioral terms, and use quotes where possible.

**How do I *decide* how to respond to a challenging moment? (Ganote, Cheung, Souza, 2016).**

- Contextual considerations
  - Student(s') characteristics
  - Relational conditions
  - Personal conditions
  - Environmental conditions
- Nature of challenging moment and possible outcomes
- Choices based on considerations
  - Private or public
  - Direct or indirect
  - Valence

Directness & Valence Examples	Private/Public
<i>Indirect/Positive:</i> “I appreciate you all hanging in there with this topic and your courage to consider different points of view.”	Public

Directness & Valence Examples	Private/Public
<i>Direct/Positive:</i> “Ken, I appreciate your honesty in this conversation. It’s hard to share strong beliefs in a manner in which people can hear them.”	Either
<i>Indirect/Constructive</i> “I am noticing that we are starting to talk over one another. Let’s be sure to actively listen when someone else is speaking.”	Public
<i>Direct/Constructive</i> “I see that you two are wanting to talk about this topic more. Can you please either share your thoughts with the larger group or, if you prefer not to, listen as others are talking?”	Either

**What are some communication tools that can be useful with challenging moments?**

*Open The Front Door* to Communication (**OTFD**) Adapted from Learning Forum

Observe: Concrete, factual, and observable (not evaluative)

Think: Thoughts based on observation (yours and/or theirs)

Feel: Emotions- “I feel (emotion).”

Desire: Specific request or inquiries about desired outcome

*Example:* “I see that you referred to COVID 19 as the “Chinese virus” (Observe). I think you may have heard this phrase from our previous political leadership and may not have fully considered the implications of this language choice (Think). I feel unsettled by this phrase (Feel) because it suggests blame on a particular community and has been linked to fueling xenophobic behavior being perpetrated against the Asian community. Just like we do not refer to the swine flu as the “American flu,” despite its origins in South Carolina, I would like us to refer to the Coronavirus and COVID 19 by their widely accepted scientific terminology (Desire) in order to not contribute to the harm that the Asian community broadly, and the Chinese-American community more specifically, are facing.”

**Take A.C.T.I.O.N.** when inappropriate remarks and behavior occur; doing nothing can do more damage than a less-than-perfect response. The steps below provide a guide on how to take A.C.T.I.O.N. rather than feeling frozen (Souza, 2018; Cheung, Ganote, & Souza, 2016).

Ask clarifying questions to assist with understanding intentions.

- “I want to make sure that I understand what you were saying. Were you saying that...?”

Come from curiosity not judgment.

- Actively and openly listen.

Tell others what you observed as problematic in a factual manner.

- “I noticed that . . .” or “I think I heard you say this...”

- If they disagree with your paraphrase and clarify a different meaning, you could end the conversation. If you suspect they are trying to “cover their tracks,” you may consider making a statement about the initial comment.
  - “I’m glad to hear I misunderstood you, because, as you know, such comments can be...”
- If they agree with your paraphrase, explore their intent behind making the comment.
  - “Can you tell me what you were you hoping to communicate with that comment?”
  - “Can you please help me understand what you meant by that?”

Impact exploration: ask for, or state, the potential impact of such a statement or action on others.

- “What do you think people think when they hear that type of comment?”
- “As you know, everything speaks. What message do you think such a comment sends?”
- “What impact do you think that comment could have on ...”

Own your own thoughts and feelings around the impact.

- “When I hear your comment I think/feel...”
- “Many people might take that comment to mean...”
- “That comment can perpetuate negative stereotypes and assumptions about...”
- “Such negative comments can cause division and defensiveness. I would like to think that is not your intent.”

Next steps: Request appropriate action be taken.

- “Our class is a learning community, and such comments make it difficult for us to focus on learning because people feel offended. So I am going to ask you to refrain from stating your thoughts in that manner in the future. Can you do that please?”
- “I encourage you to revisit your view on X as we discuss these issues more in class.”

#### **XYZ: I feel X when Y because Z.**

Example: I feel uncomfortable when I hear comments about \_\_\_\_\_, because he is not here to defend himself.

#### **What can be done AFTER a difficult dialogue or hot moment to assess the outcomes?**

- Metacommunicate: Conduct a debrief using a framework such as the Four F Debrief Framework: Facts, Feelings, Findings, Future
  - What happened in our discussion today? (facts)
  - What feelings emerged for you and why? (feelings)
  - What was hard (or good) about our discussion today? (findings)
  - What did you learn about yourself or others in our discussion today? (findings/future)
  - How can you use what was learned today in the future? (future)
- Conduct a Pledge Hand Poll 1-5 or online poll.
- Conduct a quick, anonymous Minute Paper.
  - “What was useful/difficult about today’s discussion?”
- Pass out anonymous survey (or do anonymous poll or survey) with questions assessing the discussion.
  - Can have a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions.
- Capture reflections in a Teaching Log.
  - What worked? What didn’t? What needs to change?
  - How many and who contributed? How much did I participate?
  - Quality of questions? Quality of comments?
  - What was the communication climate like (e.g., defensive, supportive)?
  - What learning took place?
  - What should I anticipate, or prepare differently for, next time?

## Action Plan

Write down 2-5 things you will do as a result of today's session:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

### Resources and References

#### [Online Resources for Challenging Moments & Thoughtful Conversations in our Courses.](#)

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## Guide for Setting Group Agreements

Adapted by Tasha Souza

From Critical Multicultural Pavilion: An [EdChange](#) project

by [Paul C. Gorski](#), 1995-2012, <http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/activities/groundrules.html>

Whenever you hope to facilitate difficult conversations a vital first step is the development of guidelines for participation. These guidelines, often referred to as "group agreements," should provide the community within a workshop or class a framework to ensure open, respectful dialogue and maximum participation.

### Generating a List of Group Agreements

There are several effective ways to create norms. If time is an issue, as it tends to be in short workshops, it may be necessary for you simply to list the group agreements for the group. Be sure to inquire whether the group agreements are agreeable and mention that if you had more time together, you would have preferred the group to generate the list.

A second way to create group agreements is to list those rules you commonly use, then ask for additional group agreements from the participants. When somebody proposes a ground rule, ask the other participants if they agree to it or would like to modify it somehow. Once there is agreement, add it to the list.

The best way to create group agreements, if you have the time, is to allow the participants to generate the entire list. Ask them to think about what they, as individuals, need to ensure a safe environment to discuss difficult and controversial issues. If the participants are having difficulty coming up with group agreements, or if they do not come up with a particular ground rule you feel is important to the success of your facilitation, try to prompt them toward it. If they still do not mention it, you can add it to the list.

### Examples of Widely Used Group Agreements

Group agreements should be developed and adapted for every unique context. Appropriate group agreements may depend partially on age, region, and other contextual factors. The following list of common group agreements from equity, diversity, and social justice related classes and workshops should serve only as a starting point for your process of creating a similar list suitable to your own situation:

1. Listen actively -- respect others when they are talking.
2. Speak from your own experience instead of generalizing ("I" instead of "they," "we," and "you").
3. Do not be afraid to respectfully challenge one another by asking questions, but refrain from personal attacks -- focus on ideas.
4. Participate to the fullest of your ability -- community growth depends on the inclusion of every individual voice.
5. Instead of invalidating somebody else's story with your own spin on her or his experience, share your own story and experience.
6. The goal is not to agree -- it is to gain a deeper understanding.
7. Be conscious of body language and nonverbal responses -- they can be as disrespectful as words.

It is also important to set a ground rule for how participation will be managed. Do you prefer for participants to raise their hands and be called on or for people to speak freely? Remember that some people -- especially those who tend to be introverted -- need more time to process thoughts and speak, so the latter option may exclude them from the discussion. Still, the formal process of raising hands to be recognized may detract from the collective atmosphere needed to discuss sometimes-controversial issues.

### Group Agreement Strategies

1. It is helpful to **post (or print)** the group agreements somewhere visible during the entire class or workshop. Some teachers and facilitators who are with a certain group over an extended period of time will bring the list of group agreements (on news print or some other transportable medium) back to the group for every session or class period. They then can refer back to the list when they sense that participants are failing to follow one or more of the items.
2. **Refer to** group agreements early and often. If you do not set a tone of adherence to the items early in the process, it may become difficult to enforce them later.
3. If you are using more than two or three group agreements, **focus participants on** particular items during appropriate activities or discussions. For example, if you are facilitating a discussion in a large group, state before the discussion starts that you would like to focus on active listening. Challenge participants to refrain from any side discussions. The same can be done if you are facilitating an experiential activity, by introducing it as a "silent" activity.
4. You **must model** these group agreements in your own participation. This is especially true for an item such as #2 (speak from your own experience). Be sure that your own language reflects ownership and responsibility by using as many "I" and "me" statements as possible.
5. If a particular ground rule is routinely broken, **bounce it back** to the participants. A fruitful discussion can often arise from a close examination of why the participants are not adhering to particular items.
6. **Revisit** the group agreements occasionally and, if time allows, ask whether the participants would like to add any new items.

### **Rethinking Group Agreements**

If a goal of conversations about equity and social justice is to challenge current structures and assumptions, we must **look closely at** all guidelines we use in our classes and workshops, asking ourselves who they support and who, if anybody, they privilege. As such, many educators and facilitators have begun to rethink the idea of group agreements and ways they currently are implemented.

Recent critical analysis of common group agreements have resulted in a collective reconsideration of their role. This is because, too often, group agreements that are put in place, whether by an educator/facilitator or by participants, privilege the already-privileged groups in a dialogical experience. For example, in a dialogue about race, white participants will often support group agreements meant to keep anger out of the discussion--group agreements focused keeping them comfortable. When we consider who is protected by group agreements like "do not express anger," it becomes apparent that, intentionally or not, they protect the participants representing privileged groups.

While I do not advocate dropping group agreements altogether; I do support the idea of seriously studying these issues and the possible ramifications of group agreements that might ultimately support the status quo by providing safety and comfort for those who, for the sake of their own learning, most desperately need to be made to feel uncomfortable. Consider opening this conversation within your class or workshop or among colleagues and challenge yourself to make sure that the discussions and dialogues you are setting up do not further oppress historically oppressed people.

## “Willing to Be Disturbed”

Source: Adapted from Wheatley, M. J. (2009). *Turning to one another: Simple conversations to restore hope to the future*. San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler Publishers, Inc.

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As we work together to restore hope to the future, we need to include a new and strange ally—our willingness to be disturbed. Our willingness to have our beliefs and ideas challenged by what others think. No one person or perspective can give us the answers we need to the problems of today. Paradoxically, we can only find those answers by admitting we don’t know. We have to be willing to let go of our certainty and expect ourselves to be confused for a time.

We weren’t trained to admit we don’t know. Most of us were taught to sound certain and confident, to state our opinion as if it were true. We haven’t been rewarded for being confused. Or for asking more questions rather than giving quick answers. We’ve also spent many years listening to others mainly to determine whether we agree with them or not. We don’t have time or interest to sit and listen to those who think differently than we do.

But the world now is quite perplexing. . . We live in a complex world, we often don’t know what’s going on, and we won’t be able to understand its complexity unless we spend more time in not knowing.

It is very difficult to give up our certainties—our positions, our beliefs, our explanations. These help define us; they lie at the heart of our personal identity. Yet I believe we will succeed in changing this world only if we can think and work together in new ways. Curiosity is what we need. We don’t have to let go of what we believe, but we do need to be curious about what someone else believes. We do need to acknowledge that their way of interpreting the world might be essential to our survival.

We live in a dense and tangled global system. Because we live in different parts of this complexity, and because no two people are physically identical, we each experience life differently. It’s impossible for any two people to ever see things exactly the same. You can test this out for yourself. Take any event that you’ve shared with others (a speech, a movie, a current event, a major problem) and ask your colleagues and friends to describe their interpretation of that event. I think you’ll be amazed at how many different explanations you’ll hear. Once you get a sense of diversity, try asking even more colleagues. You’ll end up with a rich tapestry of interpretations that are much more interesting than any single one.

To be curious about how someone else interprets things, we have to be willing to admit that we’re not capable of figuring things out alone. If our solutions don’t work as well as we want them to, if our explanations of why something happened don’t feel sufficient, it’s time to begin asking others about what they see and think. When so many interpretations are available, I can’t understand why we would be satisfied with superficial conversations where we pretend to agree with one another.

There are many ways to sit and listen for the differences. Lately, I’ve been listening for what surprises me. What did I just hear that startled me? This isn’t easy – I’m accustomed to sitting there nodding my head to those saying things I agree with. But when I notice what surprises me, I’m able to see my own views more clearly, including my beliefs and assumptions.

Noticing what surprises and disturbs me has been a very useful way to see invisible beliefs. If what you say surprises me, I must have been assuming something else was true. If what you say disturbs me, I must believe something contrary to you. My shock at your position exposes my own position. When I hear myself saying, "How could anyone believe something like that?" a light comes on for me to see my own beliefs. These moments are great gifts. If I can see my beliefs and assumptions, I can decide whether I still value them.

I hope you'll begin a conversation, listening for what's new. Listen as best you can for what's different, for what surprises you. See if this practice helps you learn something new. Notice whether you develop a better relationship with the person you're talking with. If you try this with several people, you might find yourself laughing in delight as you realize how many unique ways there are to be human.

We have the opportunity many times a day, everyday, to be the one who listens to others, curious rather than certain. But the greatest benefit of all is that listening moves us closer. When we listen with less judgment, we always develop better relationships with each other. It's not differences that divide us. It's our judgments about each other that do. Curiosity and good listening bring us back together.

Sometimes we hesitate to listen for differences because we don't want to change. We're comfortable with our lives, and if we listened to anyone who raised questions, we'd have to get engaged in changing things. If we don't listen, things can stay as they are and we won't have to expend any energy. But most of us do see things in our life or in the world that we would like to be different. If that's true, we have to listen more, not less. And we have to be willing to move into the very uncomfortable place of uncertainty.

We can't be creative if we refuse to be confused. Change always starts with confusion; cherished interpretations must dissolve to make way for the new. Of course it's scary to give up what we know, but the abyss is where newness lives. Great ideas and inventions miraculously appear in the space of not knowing. If we can move through the fear and enter the abyss, we are rewarded greatly. We rediscover we're creative.

As the world grows more strange and puzzling and difficult, I don't believe most of us want to keep struggling through it alone. I can't know what to do from my own narrow perspective. I know I need a better understanding of what's going on. I want to sit down with you and talk about all the frightening and hopeful things I observe, and listen to what frightens you and gives you hope. I need new ideas and solutions for the problems I care about. I know I need to talk to you to discover those. I need to learn to value your perspective, and I want you to value mine. I expect to be disturbed by what I hear from you. I know we don't have to agree with each other in order to think well together. There is no need for us to be joined at the head. We are joined by our human hearts.