

**Navigating Discussion Dynamics**  
**A.T. Miller, Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer**  
**Central Michigan University**

**GUIDELINES FOR DISCUSSION PARTICIPATION**

As an instructor/facilitator, it is useful to learn how to balance the tension between the need for students to take responsibility for the frequency and manner in which they participate in discussions and the need for intervention when there are concerns about frequency and manner of participation. A useful way of handling this tension is to let students know your expectations for the way in which they communicate with others (including you) in the discussion, and that they will be held accountable for communicating in respectful ways with everyone who is participating. Of course, the same guidelines are applicable to you. By doing this, any individual in the discussion has the right to make a descriptive comment about a violation and recommend a better approach when necessary. As the instructor/moderator, you play an important role as a facilitator and supporter in your students' efforts to achieve respectful ways of communicating in the classroom.

Guidelines for discussion participation can be designed by you or negotiated with your students. By asking for their input, you give students the sense of ownership that can help them take the suggested rules more seriously. The following represent guidelines that can be used to develop an atmosphere of mutual respect and collective inquiry.

1. Respect others' rights to hold opinions and beliefs that differ from your own—challenge or criticize the idea, not the person.
2. Listen carefully to what others are saying even when you disagree with what is being said: comments that you make (asking for clarification, sharing critiques, expanding on a point, etc.) should reflect that you have paid attention to the speaker's comments.
3. Be courteous—don't interrupt or engage in private conversations or electronic activity while others are speaking.
4. Support your statements—use evidence and provide rationale for your points.
5. Allow everyone the chance to talk—if you have much to say, try to hold back a bit; if you are hesitant to speak, look for opportunities to contribute to the discussion.
6. If you are offended by something or think someone else might be, speak up and don't leave it for someone else to have to respond to it.

## **Diversity Issues for the Discussion Leader**

### *Identifying Your Own Attitudes*

When we speak of multicultural dynamics in discussions, we usually focus on the diversity of the students in the room. We often forget that the moderator also brings a range of diversity issues to the classroom. Every facilitator brings his or her physical appearance and culture into the room at the same time as the students do. How you look, how you speak, how you act upon your opinions of the role of academics (and particularly of the discussion you are leading), and the extent to which these differ from the physical, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds of your students will have a profound effect on the interactions in your discussion. Thus, you need to be aware of possible reactions among the students to your race, gender, age, ethnicity, physical attributes, and abilities. Preparing for such reactions will involve not only knowing as much as you can about your students, but also turning the mirror to yourself, and finding out more about your own diversity issues.

You might identify your own attitudes toward diversity by remembering certain pivotal moments in your life. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Recall an incident in which you first became aware of differences. What was your reaction? Were you the focus of attention or were others? How did that affect how you reacted to the situation?
- What are the “messages” that you learned about various “minorities” or “majorities” when you were a child? At home? In school? Have your views changed considerably since then? Why or why not?
- Recall an experience in which your own difference put you in an uncomfortable position vis-à-vis the people directly around you. What was that difference? How did it affect you?
- How do your memories of differences affect you today? How do they (or might they) affect your teaching?

Facilitators should be aware of the comfort level they have in discussing these topics *before* they enter a classroom or discussion. It is crucial to understand how you feel about these issues and what you would say in a room where some may not understand your particular position. If diversity becomes a topic of discussion in a classroom or discussion, students will expect the teacher/moderator to be able to explain her or his perspective. Try to have thought of a formulation that clarifies your perspective, while leaving enough room for your students’ perspectives in the discussion. You may look like you “belong to” a minority, or to a majority, even if you do not. Either way, your students will initially perceive this to the exclusion of your own diverse experiences, intentions, background, etc. until they get to know you better.