

CURIOUS, COMPASSIONATE CONVERSATION

A Module for College Students

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Background:

After the 2016 U.S. presidential election, I was embarrassed by my own and others' lack of ability to have a respectful conversation with someone about a topic on which we disagreed. Lack of ability to engage in dialogue--a critical premise of democracy-- was at its peak, and as a professor, I felt I was not only ill-equipped to manage controversial classroom conversations, I felt I was contributing to the hostile habits. I am ashamed to confess that I saw myself as arming my students with as much knowledge and rhetorical savvy to "win" others to their way of thinking. After the election, I started seeking a different aim: curious, compassionate conversation with people whose views differ from our own. As the philosopher Richard Rorty says, to bring about social change, "speaking differently" is more important than "arguing well".

Since the college classroom is a laboratory of sorts, a place to practice what we preach, I developed this module. With the help of a student who was working with a mediation organization, and On Being's Civil Conversations Project, I designed this assignment. Students agree that civil conversation and ethical listening are important to learn to do, if for no other reason than to avoid conflict with their loved ones. They also love thinking that in this historical moment, being able to talk with others across difference is a "skill" required in the world. Students who completed the assignment reported that they gained confidence in taking their newly learned college ideas out into "the real world", which helped them feel that their education was relevant to their lives, not disconnected from real people and real issues as the anti-elitism viewpoint would have it. This is especially true for students who feel a "double consciousness" coming from underrepresented communities. Confidence in the ability to bring ideas home (and vice versa-- to bring their ideas from home back to college) is important for their success in college.

Scope: this assignment is designed for college-aged people and can be used in any class as a supplement to course content. It can also be used as a separate learning module in workshops or other co-curricular activities, such as orientation or leadership trainings.

Purpose:

The purpose of this assignment is to develop students' abilities to have respectful conversations with people about topics on which they disagree, thereby promoting the civil discourse required for a functioning democracy. Since most college faculty only teach content in their discipline, and never teach students how to talk about what they're learning in classes, students often find themselves ill-equipped to have conversations with people outside of college about new information and values they are exposed to in college. This assignment teaches students basic principles of civil conversation, and shifts the priority away from "winning an argument or debate" to successfully engaging in a respectful conversation as a matter of curiosity about others' perspectives and humility about one's own.

Outcomes:

Students who complete this assignment will be able to:

1. Confidently convey their own ideas without shutting down or disrespecting another's perspective or experience,
2. Deploy strategies of ethical listening,
3. Identify commonalities in viewpoints, experience, or shared humanity with others
4. Approach conversations with curiosity about the "grey areas" between polar viewpoints
5. Value building relationships of respect over the imperative to "win" a conversation by being most "right."

Requirements:

This assignment can take as little as a few hours of time, or can be stretched over several weeks, depending on the facilitator's scheduling parameters (adjust the assignment according to your needs). Participants require access to this assignment and addended resources, time to do preparatory work and discussion with the class, access to a quiet and comfortable locale and time to conduct the conversation itself, and an opportunity to debrief what they learned from the experience, either in written or discussion form.

Notes for teachers/facilitators

Preparation. We recommend that facilitators provide enough time in advance of the conversation itself to discuss its purpose so that participants know what civil conversation is, and why it is a skill they might care to acquire. Colleges do not prioritize conversation as a skill, and in fact often teach "argumentation" as the primary mode by which students will communicate what they are learning. This preparation work of telegraphing the larger context is essential for the assignment's success. Facilitators can tailor the amount of preparation to the extant familiarity of the students with these concepts. Some materials, such as the TedTALK on "Dialogue and Exchange," or several of On Being's Civil Conversations podcast series, acquaint students with the political and cultural context in which civil conversation has become a practice of democracy, not just of maintaining interpersonal relationships.

Frame the Assignment as Achieving Existing Student Learning Outcomes: Framing the assignment as teaching students a crucial skill for their hireability is also a good idea for both students and educators. Students need to know it is not just going to make them have better relationships; it will also help them get jobs. Educators benefit from institutional support for doing the assignment. For students, for example, looking at the National Association of Colleges and Employers reveals that the skills most valued in college graduates include ability to work well in teams and communicate effectively. This information can be enlisted to suggest that conversing respectfully is a desirable skill in the job-market. Also, it helps to tie the assignment into existing student learning outcomes (SLOs) of your institution, program/department, or course itself.

Reflecting this skill of having civil conversation as valuable in these places reinforces the buy-in with students, and changing course/institutional SLOs to include this skill is also an option if they're not already there in some form. For educators, shaping institutions to value this skill helps students care about it as a form of their own *professional development* (not just as a way to be a kinder, more likable person), which helps make the assignment effective. For educators, articulating how the skill fits within existing SLOs, or changing the SLOs to include this skill, helps get institutional support for the assignment.

Debrief/post-assignment. In order to synthesize and process the assignment, students should have some opportunity to share-out with each other after their conversations. Facilitators should think about what they are most comfortable doing and what aspects of the outcomes they want to focus on. For example, a debrief might allow students to see how challenging the assignment was for everybody (not just them), as a form of solidarity of experience, and to pull together some "lessons from the field" that they as a group can "take home."

The **conversation** itself: there are three key aspects to consider in assigning the conversation: topic, person, setting. Each of these requires some sideboards. For example, both people should be sober, the setting should be quiet and comfortable, cell phones should be turned off, etc. Choosing a person with whom you can meet in person, not by phone, and designating a time for the conversation--setting up the conversation's conditions is key. It's not easy to figure out who to talk to, and what to talk about--both of these are worth thinking about before assigning the conversation.

MODULE HANDOUT: CURIOUS, COMPASSIONATE CONVERSATION

Summary

The following activity is intended to facilitate the growth of your self-awareness, confidence, and skills at inviting and engaging in difficult dialogue on an interpersonal level. The assignment highlights the importance of strategic listening and provides guidance for responding productively to different views. The following assignment offers an opportunity to participate in an ethical dialogue with a broader intent to nurture constructive exchange between people. This assignment seeks to counter the divisive civil discourse that has dominated U.S. political culture in recent years, and recognizes that our ability to have curious, compassionate conversations is central to maintaining a thriving democracy and countering the divisions that threaten to unravel that democracy. It's not enough to have enlightened, "correct", evidence-based views about topics like climate change, environmental racism, immigration, gun control, or any other hot political topic. The next step involved taking these ideas out into the world, finding common ground by recognizing shared humanity in each other, and, through that respect, changing minds or having your own mind changed. This assignment helps you practice moving away from the "open-mic", twitter-feed, reactionary, aggressive,

shutting-down kind of communication that we observe on all sides of the political spectrum in current politics.

Rationale for Curious, Compassionate Conversation

Why listen to someone who fundamentally disagrees with you? Wouldn't your time be better spent championing your stance? Isn't sharing your knowledge the way to get more people to understand and align with how you feel about fracking, immigration, privilege, climate change, and all the other things you have an investment and/or strong position in? You have important things to say based on some pretty strong evidence (experience, research, science, etc.), and you may feel an *urgency* to speak up for social and environmental justice. But why would anyone who has a different take on the same topic(s), listen to *you* if you do not afford them the same air time? Listening to a perspective that is different from your own can facilitate better understanding of an unfamiliar viewpoint, and the issue itself. These interactions have the potential to produce knowledge that can inspire effective ways to approach and speak on the subject, so your intended audience might *hear* what you have to say.

Communication education is vital for productive, diverse dialogue. This activity is an opportunity to practice some of the basics for effective communication. It begins with, arguably, the most important (and arguably the most neglected) part of any conversation: *listening*.

The assignment then prompts you to reflect on your experience with listening and what you have learned. You will explore the strengths you possess and the challenges you met in the listening process. Lastly, the exercise provides an opportunity to respond to the aspects of the conversation you disagree with in such a way that maintains respect, fosters understanding, and works through one's own opposing values. This work is crucial for bridging gaps across diverse arenas of life and for learning how to respond to disagreement in ways that create conditions for productive conversation. A premise of this assignment is that the conversation itself is the goal, the end-point, the practice of the work we all are called to do as members of civil (democratic) society.

Guidelines & Helpful Information is included at the end of this handout to help prepare you for the activity and can be used as a reference during assignment preparation, participation, and reflection. Give yourself time to consider the information and the ways it can serve your process.

The activity does not promise to make tough conversations easy; rather it is intended to build your confidence in your ability to engage in difficult dialogues grounded in a place of humility, compassion, curiosity, discovery, and respect. The following information does not provide

materials for exchanges involving language barriers or variations in communication styles across cultures (i.e. eye contact, tone, hand gestures, etc.). Exploration of these factors is recommended.

What You'll be Doing: Invite difficult dialogue; learn how to facilitate knowledge by understanding diverse perspectives; practice communication skills for conflict, advocacy, leadership, and whatever work you will be doing; and reflect on and constructively respond to disagreements.

Learning Objectives:

- practice ethical listening to facilitate knowledge production by understanding diverse perspectives.
- strengthen abilities to approach and participate in difficult dialogues.
- recognize the generative value of conflict.
- explore ways to respond ethically to disagreement.

Contents:

1. Prep Work
2. The Conversation
3. Recap
4. Reflect
5. Guidelines/Techniques/Helpful Information

Prep Work

- ★ Listen to the Ted Radio Hour show, “Dialogue and Exchange,” available [here](#).
- ★ Listen to Terry Tempest Williams’ interview on On Being podcast [here](#).
- ★ Watch this Ted Talk: Celeste Headlee, “[Help America Talk Again.](#)”
- ★ Read a few op-eds on this topic, such as the LA Times, Jan 25, 2018 “The Resistance Could Use a Little More Yes, And”, [here](#). Or NYT Jan 24, 2018 “Politics Shouldn’t Be Like Open-Mic Night,” [here](#).
- ★ Visit and explore On Being’s Civil Conversations Project, [here](#). And read through their PDF resource guide on having civil conversations.
- ★ Then, review your course’s subject matter. Find two topics (i.e. privilege, population, positionality, immigration, environmental racism, ableism, environmental conservation, etc.) where multiple arguments/positions have been examined. Summarize one perspective (A) and then a contrasting perspective (B). List stated or otherwise possible values/interests that inform the arguments (equity, security, religion, autonomy, etc.).

Answer the following questions for both topics:

1. Topic: _____

- A. Summary of Topic (what is at stake)?
- B. What course materials or personal experiences inform your understanding? (List relevant authors, readings, lectures, etc.):
- C. Summary of contrasting arguments:
- D. Values/Interests

2. Topic 2: _____

- A. Summary of Topic (what is at stake)?:
- B. What course materials inform your understanding? (List relevant authors, readings, lectures, etc.):
- C. Summary of contrasting arguments:
- D. Values/Interests:

The Conversation

Think of someone you know that has differing values or beliefs from you in relation to one or more of the topics explored above. Do you think this person be willing to talk with you about it? You might need to schedule a time to talk with this person, in which case you might explain to them the general premise of this assignment (i.e., practicing curious, compassionate conversation). Or you may organically arrive in conversation with someone without prior notice. *Reviewing this assignment and the included information is part of your preparation for planned and/or spontaneous conversations!*

➤ *Find a conversation partner.* You may stumble into an opportunity with a fellow diner at the table next to you while out at lunch, or in a busy square where someone is handing out pamphlets on a topic of contention that perhaps you disagree with. The latter people are usually prepared to talk about what they are promoting and will be eager to tell you about their stance. Maybe you and your mom are hanging out for the day and you can ask if she would be willing to discuss her opinion on a given subject that you have disagreed on in the past. You can send an email to someone you have had previous dialogues with and inquire if they would be willing to continue the conversation. No matter how you get there, approach your partner with curiosity, compassion, and the intent to learn.

➤ *Set aside time.* Go with the flow of conversation, but make sure you have gathered enough information from your partner to later summarize their stance/perspective.

- o Discussion (Suggested minimum: 45 minutes-1 hour)
- o Recap (Minimum: 20 minutes)
- o Reflection (No min/max)

➤ *Prepare to focus.* Do not multitask. Put away your phone, and try to limit distractions for yourself and your partner when possible (turn off T.V., sit somewhere quiet, avoid over-stimulating spaces and alcohol or recreational drugs).

➤ *Pick a topic.* This will be the most rewarding for you if you discuss a topic you are genuinely interested in or passionate about. Your conversation partner will be doing most of the talking so they should be interested too. As the conversation progresses, new topics may surface. When possible, practice using open-ended questions pertaining to the topic to keep the conversation focused. Along the way you may find a more interesting subject you would like to explore further. Go for it!

➤ *Set your politics aside.* Put away the categorizations found within political discourse and search for the expression of interests and moral values. Forget titles. Focus on values, perceptions, lived experiences, and the stories of the other party to see why they feel so strongly about a certain subject. Remember that you, too, may be interested in being convinced to change your mind.

➤ *Language and Listening.* The conversation will consist of you listening and asking questions, rather than responding with your own opinion on the subject. You can introduce related concepts or ideas to add to the conversation, but spend this time learning what your partner thinks about them. When you do speak, remember to watch your words: words like “illogical,” “ignorant,” “unenlightened,” etc. can make people feel defensive. Be careful with your language in other ways: body language, stereotyping, personal attacks. Remember to *engage ideas, not people*. Do not take things personally and do not make your comments personal. And remember that the goal of this conversation is not to make the other person think the same thing you do. It’s to understand each other’s position better.

Possible Openings

- ❖ Would you be willing to talk (more) about _____? I'd like to get your point of view on the issue.
- ❖ I think we have different perceptions about _____. I'd like to hear your thinking on this.

Keep the Discovery Going/Ask Open-Ended Questions

Open ended questions often start with who, what, when, where, and why. They are "tell me more about that" questions. Questions like the ones below help move a discussion forward and generate more information.

- ❖ What is the main reason for your stance on this issue? Do you have specific facts, knowledge, or personal experience that influence your beliefs?
- ❖ Are there other factors that influence your opinion on this issue?
- ❖ How would you respond to the counterargument that _____?

Validation:

Restating/reflecting. Validating the feelings of another does not mean you agree with them. "This seems like it is very important to you" does not mean "I agree with what you said." You are just letting the other person know you have heard them and offering an opportunity for them to clarify in case you have misunderstood.

"I hear that you feel (EMOTION), when (SITUATION), because (REASON)."
"...and you would like (FUTURE CONDITIONS)."

Recap

➤ Give yourself enough time to write immediately following the conversation! Journal immediately after the chat about the experience, what they said, what you learned. Use the open space below to jot down ideas/concepts.

➤ Have the necessary materials at hand so you can start writing when the conversation has stopped. You might want to wait until you or the other person has left.

o What was the topic of your discussion?

o What values did your partner express? What was most important to them? (respect, loyalty, patriotism, faith, meritocracy, equality, etc.)

o What was most challenging about the conversation?

o What did you learn about your approach to disagreement?

Recap Here ↓

Reflect

The precursor to responding ethically is listening ethically. Once you have completed the ethical listening portion and recap of this exercise, write a summary of your partner’s opinion on this issue in a way that would lead them to say, “Yes, that’s exactly what I mean.” You may not have the opportunity to show them your summary, however, the act of restating and clarifying their statements during the conversation should give you a good understanding. (Use a separate sheet of paper if you need more room):

Once you have completed the summary above, you may respond. In another paragraph or two, think about where and why you disagree with your partner, only addressing the reasoning he/she gave (do not assume other reasons). Introduce your own ideas respectfully, imagining that you are engaged in a discussion with your partner. The piece you turn in to me should be something you would not feel embarrassed to show your partner.

Guidelines/Techniques/Helpful Information

➤ **Safety first!** Make sure that you and the other person involved feel safe to have this conversation. This activity is designed around principles of nonviolent communication and aims to promote peaceful approaches to conflict. Be aware of your physical environment. Throughout the dialogue it is appropriate to ask if the other person is comfortable should you sense they might not be. If they say no, you can say something along the lines of: “I’m really interested in continuing this conversation. Would you want to move that table over there or perhaps find a quiet place outside to keep chatting?” If they prefer not to speak with you, do not force it. Take the time examine your approach and the ways your questions, body language, or responses may have affected the exchange. It is possible they simply may not want to have the chat.

➤ **Be curious.** Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity. Pretend you don’t know anything, and try to learn as much as possible about the person and their point of view. Pretend you don’t have a hat in this game.

➤ This is not an argument but a conversation. Your goal isn’t being the most “right” or winning the debate. If you dazzle your partner into silence with evidence, articulate sentences, or dominant body language, you have not achieved the purpose of this assignment, even though it may feel like you’ve “won.”

➤ Your goal is not to change someone’s mind, rather to learn about what is going on in there, ultimately, to help you think through how you can improve your own approaches, strategies, and rhetorical tactics, to make arguments that resonate with rather than revolt others. Spend most of this time asking question and supporting their exploration of the subject.

➤ **Conflict as Opportunity.**

1. *Conflict is inevitable.* Our culture often promotes the attitude that conflict is wrong and should be avoided at all costs. Every conflict offers a chance to learn and to perhaps improve a situation or a relationship. Conflict can affect change, promote communication, and provide an opportunity to explore creative problem solving.

2. *The expression of conflict in a safe and peaceful environment lays the groundwork for its resolution.* Expressing conflict is healthier than “burning up” inside, living in quiet fear or acting violent. When people are able to express conflicts, their chances to reduce tension and reach mutual agreements are greater. Deeper issues which divide people can be identified, helping make communities safer places to live.

➤ **Note taking.** You might want to take notes about what the other person says to help you keep track of main points/concerns/arguments. Be sure to ask if they are okay with you doing that before you begin. Note taking can serve as a distraction for both of you. Even if they say it is ok, be aware if notetaking is helping or blocking your ability to listen to your partner. Practice verbal validations and restate what your partner says. This can bring clarity to your understanding and help you remember information.

➤ **People get angry.** The subjects you engage with might be emotionally charged for you and/or the other person. What is anger and what do you do if emotions start running high for either person? As mentioned before, this activity finds basis within non-violent communication theory and practice and is not meant to escalate to a dangerous situation, however, should you feel unsafe during your conversation, exit, and allow the other person the same respect and ability.

Anger: A defensive response to pain or the threat of pain, real or perceived.

anger is not always bad

anger can be destructive

anger can be constructive

strong emotions can be a barrier to active listening

anger can be a motivating force

What NOT to do when someone is angry:

-downplay their feelings/points

-blow them off because you think they are overreacting

-call them “hysterical” or say they are overreacting

-label who is right/wrong (don't say it)

-laugh at them

-Sarcasm or condescension

What TO do when someone is angry:

-Accept their right to be angry

-try to view their anger as a defensive reaction rather than as an offensive attack

-know your own response to anger (know your “hot buttons”)

-allow them to vent

-acknowledge/validate their feelings/perspective

-may want to set boundaries. Example: “Hey listen, if you’re yelling I can’t have this conversation. I don’t handle this well. We can take a break, or if you are going to keep yelling I’m going to need to leave”

➤ **Variables that Affect Listening**

(McCorkle, S., and Reese, M., (2004) *Mediation Theory and Practice*. Boise, ID: Pearson.)

Internal Listening Barriers

o *Internal preoccupation*: We can comprehend approximately 500 words per minute but are able to speak approximately 125-150 words per minute. Avoid using the extra space for internal dialogues.

o *Self-involvement*: Focusing on one’s own role and how one appears instead of focusing on the expressed interests/needs of the speaker.

o *Selective attention*: Assuming we know what the other person is going to say or assuming repetition of a topic of concern is not important. If people are repeating certain things, restate the point back to them to make sure you understand, and/or delve further into that specific issue. Encourage them to unpack it for you.

o *Listening with an agenda*: Listen for facts that will fit one’s preconceived ideas about the case or its resolution.

External Listening Barriers

o *External distractions*: Letting background noise, setting, or other distractions distract you or the other person from the conversation.

o *Communication style*: Focusing on the accent, grammar, or other stylistic features of speech instead of the speaker’s meaning and intentions.

o *Preconceptions*: Past interactions with the other person, including first impressions, contaminate how the listener interprets messages, so the meaning is more easily misinterpreted.

o *Constituencies*: Assuming the disputant will think or behave in particular ways because of groups they affiliate with

EFFECTIVE LISTENING TECHNIQUES

STOP TALKING: You cannot listen while talking.

EMPATHIZE: Put yourself in the other's place to understand what they are trying to communicate and why it matters to them.

ASK QUESTIONS: When you do not understand, when you need more explanation, when you want to show that you are listening, ask. Do not ask questions to embarrass or debunk the speaker.

BE PATIENT: Do not rush. Give people the time they need to speak.

CONCENTRATE: Focus your attention on the words, ideas and feelings related to the subject.

LOOK AT THE OTHER PERSON: Careful observation focuses your concentration. Faces, eyes, posture and gestures are important communication clues. Let the other person see that you are listening.

PUT YOUR EMOTIONS ASIDE: Try to remove your own worries, fears, problems and anger from the discussion. Your emotions may keep you from listening well.

ELIMINATE DISTRACTIONS: Put down papers or pencils. Do not jingle change in your pocket, rap on the desk or stare at the ceiling.

GET THE MAIN POINTS: Concentrate on the most important ideas. Details can be important, but focus on them only to determine if they support or define the primary ideas.

SHARE RESPONSIBILITY FOR COMMUNICATION: Only part of the responsibility rests with the speaker. Ask for clarification if necessary.

REACT TO IDEAS, NOT TO THE PERSON: Do not let your reactions to the person influence your interpretation of what they say. The ideas may be valid, even if you do not like the person.

Source: Humboldt Mediation Services (2014), INC., Mediator Training Manual. Eureka, CA.