Guidelines for Discussing Political Conflict and/or Incidents of Public Violence and Extreme Expression

The guidelines and suggestions collected here are designed to help instructors and others facilitate classroom, group, or workshop convened discussion around some of the disturbing public incidents of recent months. These include **international acts of terro**r involving civilians in public venues, and varied responses to them, and within the U.S. incidents of death and **violence visited on unarmed civilians of color** by law enforcement, and the varied responses to those incidents, as well as the **targeted killing of police officers and LGBTQ individuals**, and responses to those incidents. These three different types of incidents and circumstances all contribute to a general sense of insecurity for many, as does the rhetoric surrounding the varied responses to the incidents. In addition, the new year is being shaped within a context of **heightened activism, political speech, and commentary** that is contentious and has many feeling vulnerable and/or needing to assert themselves in particular ways.

Among the many Cornell constituents who may be feeling anxiety and many other emotions in response to the news around us are others who may see or feel no particular connection or reaction to what their colleagues find shocking or disturbing in any or all of these four areas, or may even be feeling hope. As an engaged intellectual community of many viewpoints, it is likely that a number of students, staff, faculty, and others will want to explore how they think and feel about world events. In this atmosphere, instructors and facilitators may want to plan discussions or be ready to handle unexpected questions. The following guidelines help address these contexts.

Whatever the context, discussion about such topics will be most effective when it:

- is structured in a way that defines boundaries for the process, and that brings the discussion to closure within the classroom or other setting
- somehow includes all students/participants in the class or setting
- extends discourse beyond polarized and polarizing debates
- acknowledges that facts and interpretations of specific social and political conflicts may change with time, but tools for conceptual understanding and dialogue will continue to be useful beyond the current moment

Spontaneous Discussions: Dealing with the Unanticipated

If, during class or other convened event, someone raises for discussion an issue or incident involving recent controversies, consider the following strategies:

- Acknowledge the person who raised the issue or example while noting that

people may vary in their responses and concerns.

- Decide whether you are ready and willing to engage with this topic right away.
- Quickly assess whether the class or group would like to spend time sharing views about the topic. If people want to have a dialogue, schedule a discussion for a later class or group session and suggest ways that everyone could prepare. Consider the strategies outlined in the "Planned Discussions" section below.
- If it is not a group that will convene again, or is a discussion you are not prepared to facilitate or manage, be ready to refer participants to any of a number of public forums where such discussions are taking place this semester across campus.

The Center for Teaching Innovation and the Intergroup Dialogue Project have additional resources for handling "hot moments" that emerge in your classroom when you do not anticipate them. See links at the end of this guide.

Simple and direct expressions of concern and support

Many instructors and leaders of other groups and events on campus may feel the need or wish to acknowledge the stresses that many are feeling from the contemporary context of violent words and deeds, and to express support. There are those who feel that silence on these topics is personally hurtful or callous, while others might question the appropriateness of any particular expression. It is important not to assume who might be most affected in what ways, since a number of these issues touch on people's personal identities and experiences, as well as their most deeply held religious and political beliefs. General, inclusive, concise, and purposeful expressions of personal concern and support that directly refer to actions that can be taken to care for oneself and others are best. Be prepared to respond calmly and be open to listen to any unexpected or emotional reactions to your best intentions. Recognize that these incidents affect both individuals and communities, here at Cornell and off campus.

Planned Discussions

Planning a discussion on an issue or larger theme related to recent or current events benefits from consideration of the following topics, each of which is addressed below:

- Identifying a clear purpose
- Establishing ground rules
- Providing a common base for understanding
- Creating a framework for the discussion that maintains focus and flow
- Including everyone
- Being an active facilitator
- Making room for emotion
- Summarizing discussion and gathering student feedback
- Handling issues that involve the instructor's identity
- University resources

Identifying a clear purpose

Starting a discussion with clearly articulated objectives can help shape the nature of the discussion and link it to other course goals. Examples of general objectives include:

- Connecting the topic with course material, including fundamental concepts and strategies for analysis and thoughtful reflection
- Increasing awareness about the topic by providing information that is not generally addressed in informal discussions
- Promoting critical thinking by helping students to understand the complexity of the issues
- Enhancing skills for dialogue that students can take into other venues
- Relating classroom discussion to the roles that students have as citizens within the university community and larger society

More specific objectives for discussion about social conflicts, especially those involving public violence and extreme or targeted expression, may focus on policies, social conventions, or civic responsibilities, including the following:

- Examining and developing positions on issues of social policy, university policy, or social convention.
- Identifying a core problem underlying social conflicts and exploring possible answers to the problem.
- Analyzing the root causes or reasons for a social conflict (i.e., a past-oriented discussion).
- Exploring possible consequences or implications of a conflict (i.e., a future-oriented discussion).
- Planning effective actions to reduce such incidents and/or to support vulnerable populations.

(This second list is adapted from Ronald Hyman, 1980, In *Improving Discussion Leadership*. New York: Columbia University, College Teachers Press.)

Establishing ground rules or guidelines

In class or other sessions, instructors can either work with students and participants to generate ground rules or discussion guidelines, or they can present a set of guidelines and then work with students to accept or modify them. Referring back to these community agreements can be very helpful if discussion becomes tense. Some suggestions include the following:

- Listen respectfully, without interrupting.
- Listen actively and with an ear to understanding others' views. Try to understand what lies at the core of other people's words. (Don't just think about what you are going to say while someone else is talking.)

- Criticize ideas, not individuals.
- Commit to learning, not debating. Comment in order to share information, not to persuade.
- Avoid blame, speculation, and inflammatory language.
- Allow everyone the chance to speak.
- Avoid assumptions about any member of the class or generalizations about social groups. Do not ask individuals to speak for their (perceived) social group.

It is important that participants agree on the ground rules before discussion begins.

Providing a common basis for understanding

Providing those present with a common basis for understanding from the start will help keep the discussion focused and provide concrete case studies or examples. For instance, you can assign readings on a specific conflict, instruct students or others to select their own readings or other materials to bring to class or the next meeting, or show a video clip to prompt discussion. Another option is to have students or other participants review materials during class and follow up with a structured discussion.

You can also draw upon participants' own knowledge to establish a common basis:
- In class, ask students to identify key points of information, stating their source. (You can ask students to do this individually and then pool the information, or you can simply elicit information from the class as a whole.) Make a list of these for the whole class.
- Use this elicitation as a time to distinguish evaluative, "loaded," comments from less evaluative statements, and from statements of personal opinion or experience. Acknowledge how difficult it may be to make these distinctions at times.

In order to identify and situate threads of discussion that are extraneous to the focus, or are very speculative, ask for and identify information that students would *like to know* to clarify their understanding on these questions or tangents, even if that information is not available.

Creating a framework for the discussion that maintains focus and flow

Because any social conflict or controversy is a complex topic, it is important to create a framework for the discussion in addition to having clearly defined objectives. Your framework can be a guide, balancing the need to have clear purpose and direction while being open to student observations and interpretation.

The following strategies can help you maintain the focus and flow of the discussion:

- Begin the discussion with clear, open-ended but bounded questions that

encourage discussion.

- o Avoid "double-barreled questions" which pose two problems simultaneously, or "hide the ball" questions that search for a specific answer ("can you guess what I'm thinking?" types of questions).
- o Ask questions that prompt multiple varied answers rather than short factual responses, stark moral judgements, or simple "yes" or "no" replies.
- Prepare specific questions to use if the class is silent or hesitant about speaking. Some examples include: "What makes this hard to discuss?" and "What needs to be clarified at this point?"
- Encourage students to elaborate upon their comments where needed. With probing questions, an instructor can prompt students to share more specific information, clarify an idea, elaborate on a point, or provide further explanation.
- Encourage students to name feelings and to explain their feelings.
- Be prepared to re-direct the discussion if students go beyond the intended focus. Drawing attention to the readings or reminding the class about the discussion objectives are useful management techniques.
- When students raise points that are extraneous to the focus, note that these are important but tangential. Recap them at the end of class as other topics to think about on one's own, to validate student contributions.
- Recap the key discussion points or issues at the end of class, in writing if possible.

Including everyone

To include all students' or participants' perspectives can be challenging in a whole group discussion, especially if people are dealing with unfamiliar or controversial material. Moving beyond a whole group discussion format allows all students to participate and helps prevent the most talkative or opinionated individuals from dominating the conversation. Using small groups, your class or group can hear from those who may not speak otherwise, including those who may see their views as marginalized as well as those who want to explore ideas they are not sure about.

Some methods for increasing the number of discussants include:

- *The Round*: Give each person an opportunity to respond to a guiding question without interruption or comments. Provide participants with the option to pass. After the round, discuss the responses.
- *Think-Pair-Share*: Give those present a few minutes to respond to a question individually in writing. Divide the group into pairs. Instruct the students to share their responses with group members. Provide students with explicit directions, such as "Tell each other why you wrote what you did." After a specified time period, have the class reconvene in order to debrief. You can ask for comments on how much their pairs of views coincided or differed, or ask what questions remain after their paired discussion.
- *Sharing Reflection Memos*: Prior to the discussion, have students write a reflective memo in response to a question or set of questions that you pose. As

part of the discussion, ask students to read their memos, and/or share them in pairs or threes.

With each of these methods, the instructor or facilitator needs to summarize the various responses and relate them to the discussion objectives.

Being an active facilitator

In order to keep a discussion focused and purposeful, it is important to be an active facilitator rather than a passive observer. Be careful to maintain some control but not over-control. Your role as an active facilitator can include rewording questions posed by students, correcting misinformation, making reference to relevant reading materials or course content, asking for clarification, and reviewing main points.

Students may expect their instructors to express their own point of view, or they may ask explicitly for this view. In deciding how to respond, instructors should consider their comfort in expressing personal views, and also the impact such expressions will have on this and future discussion in class. For instance, will sharing your perspective usefully model the way one can take a stance on a complex topic, or will it more likely shut down those students who may disagree with you? Will your sharing of your views helpfully respond to comments that marginalize or devalue students in your class?

Making room for emotion

It is natural that fear, anger, sorrow, personal and group pride, defensiveness, and a host of other emotions come up when discussing intense violence and brutality towards innocent people combined with jarring rhetoric and harsh voices of judgment. Some of these emotions can be experienced empathically about others, or about social institutions and contexts. Allowing participants to write reflectively about their emotional responses, either during a few minutes of a session, or immediately before or after, can help manage, prepare, and process the responses that many feel on a given topic, rather than just think about. A facilitator can invite individuals to "take a minute to write down how you are feeling right now" at a particularly heightened moment of conflict or misunderstanding or profound sharing.

Summarizing discussion and gathering student feedback

It is very important to save time at the end of the class or session to conclude by summarizing the main points of the discussion. Students are more likely to feel that a discussion was valuable if the instructor, with the help of the class, synthesizes what has been shared or identifies the key issues explored.

To obtain student feedback about the quality of the discussion and to identify issues that may need follow-up, you can save the last five minutes of class for students to write a quick "minute paper". Ask them to respond to some or all of these questions:

- What are the three most important points you learned today?
- What important questions remain unanswered for you?
- What did you learn specifically from what someone else said that you would not have thought of on your own?

Review the student responses before your next meeting with the class or group. During the next session, briefly summarize the student feedback and thank the students for their participation.

Handling issues that involve the instructor's identity

Discussing an issue of social conflict can involve the instructor's identity in a number of ways. Students may make assumptions about the expectations an instructor has in leading the class discussion. Assumptions may be based on the students' perception of the instructor's identity, on the way that the instructor has handled other class sessions, and on their personal interactions with the instructor.

In addition, some issues and events may trigger reactive responses in an instructor, and students may say things and speak in ways that trigger emotional reactions. Instructors need to be aware of the possibility (or even the likelihood) of having an emotional response, even if a discussion is thoughtfully planned. Recognizing the response and the trigger as such will help an instructor to stay even-tempered in leading the discussion. To handle statements that trigger emotional responses, instructors will want to draw on techniques that will allow them and the class to step back and gain perspective (e.g., naming the triggering issue, giving oneself time by asking students to do a brief writing exercise, working with the class to reframe or contextualize the triggering statement, rely on a co-facilitator). If an instructor needs to let such a moment simply pass by, it is important to find time later to talk through the experience, and to address the triggering issue with others who are outside of the class or situation.

In the event that one or more students try to draw the instructor into an emotional response, the ground rules for discussion can play a vital role, and the instructor can model constructive behavior in demonstrating how to unpack such a heated moment by reviewing what had led up to it, in pointing out differences between baiting, debating, and discussing, and/or steering the discussion into a more useful direction.

Cornell University Resources

Center for Teaching Innovation: teaching.cornell.edu
Intergroup Dialogue Project: www.idp.cornell.edu
Diversity and Inclusion: diversity.cornell.edu
University Diversity Officers: universitydiversityofficers@cornell.edu