

Communication Guidelines on Sensitive Political Discussions

The dynamic exchange of thoughts and opinions is at the heart of intellectual growth, fostering an environment where critical thinking thrives. However, as we engage in discussions on sensitive political topics, it becomes essential to navigate these conversations with respect, empathy, and a commitment to fostering constructive dialogue.

The present document is a collaborative effort born out of a two-day communication workshop in which UdK Berlin students representing diverse perspectives and experiences collectively crafted guidelines to create an inclusive space for dialogue, where every voice is heard and respected. These recommendations offer a flexible framework that encourages adaptation to meet the unique dynamics of each space of discussion within our diverse academic community.

WHAT IS EXPECTED FROM THE PARTICIPANTS

- Each person participating in the discussion should follow the communication guidelines.. These can be modified to the participants' needs upon consensus of the group in question.
- Make sure that everyone knows the rules and restate them when needed.
- Aiming for a respectful atmosphere.
- Foster a culture of empathy and active listening: do not interrupt; listen to understand the other person fully, rather than to respond.
- Paraphrase to make sure that you are receiving the intended message that your conversation partner is communicating and ask questions if any information is unclear.
- Fact based information: Share and consult different reliable sources for information.
- Give space and acknowledge everyone's emotions.
- Everyone should have space to speak and this space must be fairly shared (e.g. avoid monologues using a timer).
- Everyone should listen to other voices without interrupting nor judging.
- Error friendliness with accountability and willingness to admit mistakes.
- Decide on which information is confidential (e.g. Anonymity of participants, sharing private experiences, etc.).
- Identify areas of agreement or shared values to build on common ground.

WHAT WON'T BE TOLERATED

- Any form of discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, origin, race, religion, neurological-cognitive diversity, disability, social and economic status.
- All types of violence, including insults, mobbing and harassment.

- The denial of experiences and the invalidation of other people's feelings.
- Avoid blaming and making judgements. The arguments can be debated but personal attacks won't be accepted.
- Misuse of power and privilege: Differences of opinion should not lead to further consequences inside and outside of the discussion spaces.
- Manipulation of information.
- Repeated violation of rules and boundaries.

SELF AND COLLECTIVE CARE

- Remember that you are free to leave or to move if you don't want to participate or if you feel uncomfortable.
- Observe the room: Confirm the wellbeing of participants during the discussions.
- Use trigger warnings.
- Self-reflect before and after the session.
- Pay attention to the tone of your voice and mind your body language.
- Ask for the other people's needs and communicate clearly yours.
- Encourage a return to the main topic and avoid personal attacks.
- Acknowledge existing privileges.
- Address structural/institutional hierarchies in the room (e.g.: inform when people from various university status groups or external parties are present in a discussion).
- Allocate a specific time for discussion and incorporate breaks if necessary.
- Open the space for giving and receiving feedback.
- If possible, create moments to discharge, indulge, and have informal meetings after the discussions to strengthen your collective bonds, in a less formal and more human sense without talking about the conflict.

WHAT TO DO IN CASE OF ESCALATION

- Take a break.
- Observe and trace the reason for the escalation.
- Identify and talk about the feelings that arose during the conversation.
- Ask for the needs of parties who are affected by the escalation.
- Engage in efforts for a solution that is beneficial for all parts.
- Give a chance to continue at another time or stop at all (agreement on disagreement).
- Respect if the people affected need time alone.

WHAT TO DO IN CASE OF BOUNDARIES VIOLATION

- Agree on a signal to de-escalate, slow down or stop disruptive behavior before starting the process – for example a specific word or tone.
- Restate rules for discussion, remind the existing boundaries.
- Politely but clearly set boundaries if the discussion becomes disrespectful.

- Point out which limits are being infringed.
- Give the benefit of the doubt and make sure that there is no misunderstanding.
- Consideration will be given to the needs of the affected person.
- The focus will not be on punishment or exclusion, but on restoration of the harm. The person who crossed the boundary will be given the opportunity to make amends.
- Depending on the degree of the boundary violation, a third party may be called in to assist with the case.
- It is advisable to involve all participants when proceeding with decisions that concern them all.
- If necessary, delegate a neutral party to mediate.