

## Guidelines for Class Discussion

William Fisher

January 2024

The fundamental principle pertaining to class discussions, whether conducted in a room or online, is that the teacher should treat students with respect, and students should treat each other with respect. The guidelines that flow from that principle include:

- Avoid *ad hominem* attacks. It is entirely legitimate to criticize a view expressed by another member of the class, but criticism of the person who expresses a view is inappropriate.
- When engaged in an argument, address the best interpretation of the stance taken by one's opponent.
- Do not conflate arguments offered in role-playing exercises with statements meant to express speakers' personal views.
- Feel free to discuss with people who are not members of the class any issues addressed or views expressed in the discussion. However, strive to do so in ways that will not chill future conversations. This implies that:
  - One should adhere to the letter and spirit of the Harvard Law School Community Statement on Non-Attribution: "When using social media or other forms of communication designed to reach members of the public, no one may repeat or describe a statement made by a student in class in a manner that would enable a person who was not present in the class to identify the speaker of the statement."
  - One should strive to describe fairly the context in which a potentially controversial statement was made.
  - One should minimize references to the race, gender, sexual orientation, or political affiliation of the people who have made potentially controversial statements in class, unless such characteristics are directly relevant to the issue being discussed.
  - It is helpful to keep in mind that everyone makes mistakes.

When the application of one of these guidelines is unclear, it is better to seek guidance from the fundamental principle than to parse the language of the guideline in question.

Responsibility for maintaining an atmosphere characterized by honesty, inclusiveness, fidelity to facts, and respect is shared by the teacher and the students in the class.