

## NORMS FOR DISCUSSION IN DISTANCE LEARNING



*During this challenging time, many educators have been thrust into online teaching for the first time, with minimal planning or preparation. We know you are navigating many obstacles as you try to do what is best for your students. For those who are fortunate enough to lead synchronous virtual discussions with your students, you may be asking yourself: **How do I do this?***

*You have probably established norms for discussion in your classroom. This document makes some suggestions about how to translate those norms into an online environment.*

### Norms for equitable access and participation

This is a tricky one! In your classroom, you can read facial expressions and body language. You can circulate around the room, crouch down next to a student who's struggling and whisper in their ear. Online, you have none of that. So how will you ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute?

- **You will probably have to take an active role in selecting the next speaker.** In your classroom discussions, you may allow students to speak without raising hands. This is a worthy goal, but it's almost impossible to do in large group virtual discussions. So how will you select who speaks?
- **You may cold call,** using some version of "popsicle sticks" to select students randomly. You may go around the virtual circle asking everyone to speak. However, when you are having a thoughtful, engaging discussion, and you call on someone who doesn't really have anything to add at the moment, you can derail that discussion.
- **You may ask for volunteers.** Consider what procedures you will use to do this effectively. Does your online learning platform have a "raise hand" function? Can you see all students on video in order to ask them to raise their hands (or thumbs) to volunteer? Can students submit answers in writing via chat or google docs, and you call on students who indicate they have something to say?
- **You may do a combination.** Just like in the classroom - but likely even more so - you will have students who sit back and say nothing. Think about how you can get them involved. Use lots of wait time. Consider asking a quieter student to repeat or respond to a peer's comment (see the talk moves handout for suggestions). If possible, try to warn a quieter student that it is almost their turn to speak, so they are not caught off guard.

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## Norms for respect

Just like in your classroom, you have to insist that students are respectful to one another. If students are afraid their contributions will be mocked, even in subtle ways, they will not want to participate.

- Consider opening your first online discussion with a **conversation about what a respectful online discussion looks like**. What might stop people from wanting to participate? What might encourage people to participate? What can we do if we notice a classmate doing something that might discourage others from participating?
- **Remind students how to disagree respectfully**. For example, you may introduce the norm of saying, “I respectfully challenge Kayla’s idea” rather than “I disagree with Kayla.”

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## Norms for reasoning

Sharing a thought during an online discussion can feel like “talking into a void.” Combat this by sticking with one student long enough to understand their reasoning, and encouraging students to respond to one another.

- Remind students that in class, you expect them not just to make a statement, but to **explain their reasoning**. Online discussion is no different. You may ask them, “Why do you think that?” or “I’m not sure I understand. Can you clarify?” Encourage them to ask those questions of one another as well.
- When a student makes a statement, **resist the temptation to move onto another student**. Stay with that comment for a few minutes. Ask the student to say more about it, or to explain their reasoning. Ask another student to repeat or react to the statement.
- **Ask students to respond to one another**. In online discussions, even more than in the classroom, it can feel like when one student is speaking, the other students can zone out. Ask students to repeat what a classmate has said - not as a classroom management move (“Gotcha - you weren’t listening!”) but as a way to move the discussion forward. Ask students to add one to one another’s ideas, or to agree or disagree and explain why.

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## Norms and expectations as part of the environment

In your classroom, you likely have a norms chart or poster hanging on the wall. These norms are so important that they are posted at all times for students to refer to. Norms for online discussions are equally, if not more, important.

- **Take time to establish norms** before engaging in online discussion. Set aside time in your first discussion to talk with students about what behaviors you expect to see and why these behaviors play an important role in a productive discussion.
- **Review the norms before each discussion**. At the beginning of each online class meeting, briefly review the norms and expectations. Consider typing them onto a slide and sharing your screen so students can see them.
- **Refer back to the norms** during discussion, whenever you sense that your expectations are not being met.
- **Reflect on the norms** at the end of discussion. At least for the first few online class meetings, set aside time at the end to reflect on how well these norms and expectations were met. Acknowledge that this way of interacting is new and difficult for everyone. We’re not going to get it perfect on the first try! Just come back, try again, and do a little better next time.