



HARVARD

Office of the Vice Provost for Advances in Learning



HILT CONFERENCE

Harvard Initiative for Learning and Teaching

2024

2024 HILT Conference: “Open Minds in Dialogue”

Friday, September 20, 2024, at Harvard Graduate School of Education

The thirteenth annual HILT Conference, “Open Minds in Dialogue,” underscored the importance of integrating emotional and analytical skills in teaching, navigating the complexities of speech-related pressures, and fostering inclusive environments for open dialogue. Key discussions revolved around how educators can balance personal narratives with academic rigor, the dynamics of speech-related pressures, and the role of faculty in creating neutral and trustworthy classroom environments. The following insights from the event are meant for educators and institutions aiming to enhance academic and professional development through effective communication and inclusive practices.

Key Takeaways from...

Plenary 1: “How Did We Get Here?”

Session Description: *The opening plenary will examine the historical context for current challenges to open inquiry on university campuses and consider how history can inform our path forward.*

Distinguished historian Jill Lepore will kick off this plenary by examining what has shaped the current landscape of dialogue and expression in education, followed by a discussion with the faculty panel moderated by Dean Rakesh Khurana.

Jill Lepore’s Presentation:

- **Historical Context of Free Speech:** Jill Lepore provided a historical perspective on the evolution of free speech in the United States. She highlighted the transition from religious toleration to political tolerance and underscored the role of adversarial debate in promoting truth. This foundation has influenced America's commitment to free expression, traced from trials by jury and deeply rooted in religious and political history.
- **The Role of Petition in Freedom of Expression:** Lepore emphasized the historical significance of the right to petition the government for redress of grievances, which was crucial for disenfranchised groups such as enslaved people, women, and indigenous people. This aspect of free speech was critical in the anti-slavery and women's rights movements, showcasing the intersection of political advocacy and academic freedom.
- **Challenges of Academic Freedom:** Throughout history, there have been significant challenges to academic freedom, particularly during periods of political turmoil, such as the Sedition Act of 1918 and McCarthyism in the 1950s. These periods saw loyalty oaths and the suppression of dissent, highlighting the ongoing struggle to balance academic freedom with political pressures.

Faculty Panel Response:

- **Diverse Student Backgrounds and Classroom Dynamics:** The panel highlighted the challenge of fostering open dialogue among students who come from a variety of high school backgrounds where discussion of sensitive topics might have been suppressed or strictly regulated. This diversity requires thoughtful strategies to build an inclusive environment that encourages respectful and productive conversations.
- **Role of Faculty in Creating a Neutral and Trustworthy Classroom Environment:** Faculty members discussed the importance of modeling open and respectful dialogue and ensuring fair treatment of all students, regardless of their viewpoints. This involves clear communication about the neutral role of the classroom and setting expectations that faculty will fairly evaluate student work, reinforcing an environment where students feel safe to express diverse perspectives.
- **Incorporating Open Dialogue into Professional and Academic Development:** The panelists emphasized the need to integrate skills for open dialogue into the curriculum, particularly in professional settings like medical and business schools. For example, medical students must learn to interact respectfully and effectively with diverse patients, and business students must be prepared to navigate complex, values-based discussions. This integration helps prepare students for real-world scenarios where open dialogue is critical for leadership and professional success.