



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 Breakout Sessions

### Creating Effective Social Contracts

**Session Description:** *Creating course norms can set the stage for a strong course community that can collaboratively engage in nuanced learning experiences. But once you’ve created a social contract with your students, how do you carry it through for the rest of the semester? What are your responsibilities as an instructor and what responsibilities do you share with students? How can you hold each other accountable if a norm is violated? How might we view difficult conversations as a critical part of the learning process rather than a challenge to be avoided?*

- **Importance of Setting and Continuously Reinforcing Community Norms:** Effective social contracts and touchstones are crucial for creating a safe and inclusive classroom environment. Setting these norms on the first day is just the beginning; they must be continuously reviewed and integrated into every class session to ensure that the community standards are upheld and internalized by all participants.
- **Categories and Benefits of Touchstones:** Touchstones can be categorized into three main areas: presence (how participants show up), contribution (what participants bring to the space), and extraction (what participants take from the space). These touchstones help create a structured and supportive environment conducive to deep and meaningful learning.
- **Practical Strategies for Maintaining Norms:** Strategies like starting each class with a welcoming activity, reinforcing confidentiality (e.g., the “Vegas Rule”), using “I” statements, and encouraging open, honest questions help maintain a respectful and engaged classroom. Using activities like “Breathe, Extend, Invite” can ground and center participants, fostering a mindful and present learning environment.
- **Adaptation and Flexibility in Norm Setting:** Norms need to be adaptable to both the subject matter and the environment. For example, norms used in a course on nonprofit leadership might differ from those in a calculus class. Additionally, participatory exercises to co-create

norms can be more effective when done after the students are familiar with each other, typically around the second week of classes.

- **Handling Norm Breakage and Resistance:** When norms are broken or resisted, it is essential to address the situation openly. Techniques like "notice, name, nurture" can help in this process by acknowledging the behavior, naming the issue, and nurturing a constructive discussion around it. Encouraging dialogue and reflection rather than avoidance helps in resolving tensions and reinforcing the community standards.