



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

### Small Moves for Big Topics: Transforming Hard Conversations into Learning Opportunities

**Session Description:** *This session will examine strategies and classroom practices to turn challenging classroom discussions into valuable learning experiences. Panelists will share their process to planning and teaching their class sessions and their approach to using hard topics as a vehicle for impactful learning. Participants will then be invited to explore difficult conversations or moments in their own teaching with panelists and each other.*

- **Creating a Safe and Trusting Environment:** Establishing trust is essential for engaging in hard conversations. This can be achieved through community agreements, setting intentional class norms, and modeling respectful dialogue. However, it's important to recognize that building trust is a continuous process and may not always be fully realized due to various student backgrounds and experiences.
- **Scaffolding Discussions and Starting at Surface Level:** Allowing students to start with surface-level discussions helps them feel comfortable before gradually delving deeper into more challenging topics. Scaffold questions to transition from simple to complex, ensuring that students are progressively pushed towards introspection and deeper understanding.
- **Utilizing Concrete Tools and Evidence-Based Conversations:** Using concrete tools like primary sources, case studies, and role-playing can help frame difficult discussions. These tools provide a neutral starting point for conversations, encouraging students to engage critically with the material and enabling them to view topics through different lenses without feeling personally attacked.
- **Emphasizing the Learning Community Over Social Dynamics:** Distinguishing between a social community and a learning community helps students focus on the primary goal of education, which is learning. Reinforcing that disagreements and discussions are meant to enhance

learning rather than undermine social relationships can lower the stakes for participation and foster a more open dialogue.

- **Allowing Silence and Encouraging Reflective Thinking:** Silence can be a powerful tool in facilitating deep learning. Giving students time to think and reflect before speaking, such as using writing exercises during class, allows them to better articulate their thoughts and engage more meaningfully in discussions. Encouraging students to sit with their discomfort and ponder why they feel a certain way about a topic can lead to more profound personal and intellectual growth.