



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

Student Perspectives: From Lived Experience to Critical Engagement

Session Description: *This session features Harvard undergraduate and recent graduate students who have stepped forward in various roles to foster open dialogue in academic settings. Their own experiences in the classroom—and leadership among their peers—will ground us in practical strategies to critically examine complex issues and controversial topics from student perspectives. Through this lens, we will explore how instructors can effectively incorporate students’ lived experiences into the curriculum to craft authentic educational experiences involving challenging conversations.*

- **Bridging Diverse Backgrounds and Experiences:** Recognizing that students come from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, it is crucial to create an inclusive environment where all voices are heard. This includes understanding the different conversations students are accustomed to and finding ways to facilitate meaningful dialogue despite these differences.
- **Creating Safe and Vulnerable Spaces:** Establishing a classroom environment where students feel safe to express their vulnerabilities and personal experiences is essential. This can be achieved through practices like setting clear norms, modeling vulnerability as instructors, and using structured dialogues to ensure everyone feels heard and respected.
- **Addressing Imposter Syndrome and Encouraging Engagement:** Many students struggle with imposter syndrome. Addressing this by highlighting that the university values their unique perspectives and encouraging them to share their experiences can help mitigate these feelings. Giving students small, manageable ways to participate can boost their confidence and engagement.
- **Practical Strategies for Discussion:** Effective strategies for fostering respectful and inclusive conversations include:
 - Asking dialogic questions that promote understanding rather than debate.
 - Setting the tone with norms that encourage curiosity over judgment.

- Using food, music, and other comfort elements to create a welcoming atmosphere.
- Encouraging personal storytelling and experiences to enrich the conversation.
- **Faculty Role and Approach:** Faculty should be mindful of the power dynamics in the classroom and strive to create equal footing for dialogue. This includes:
 - Acknowledging their own positionality and setting an example by sharing their lived experiences.
 - Being intentional about the topics chosen for discussion and ensuring they are framed in a way that allows diverse viewpoints to be expressed.
 - Recognizing when certain topics may require different contexts (e.g., office hours versus the classroom) to be discussed effectively.