

## General Discussion Background

### Summary

Setting norms helps foster productive conversations. Suggestions for conducting classroom discussions are also provided.

### Teacher Instructions

Introduce norms as ‘standards or models by which behavior is judged within a community as acceptable/unacceptable’.

Ask students why norms are important for class discussions of ethics. Tell them that they will set norms for their own class.

Allow students some quiet reflection time.

Gather ideas from the group in a brainstorming session: One method is to ask students to generate a list of norms in small groups, and then ask each group to share one norm until all have been listed.

Clarify and consolidate norms as necessary.

Post norms where they can be seen by all and revisit them often.

### Possible Student Discussion Norms

- A bioethics discussion is not a competition or a debate with a winner and a loser.
- Everyone will respect the different viewpoints expressed.
- If conflicts arise during discussion, they must be resolved in a manner that retains everyone’s dignity.
- Everyone has an equal voice.
- Interruptions are not allowed and no one person is allowed to dominate the discussion.
- All are responsible for following and enforcing the rules.
- Critique ideas, not people.

### Suggestions for Conducting Classroom Discussions

- Listen carefully to what students are saying when they argue a particular issue. Be patient and allow students to express their views fully.
- Take notice of the words that students use in arguing their positions. Often the choice of words will reveal a bias or an unquestioned assumption.
- Ask clarifying questions. Many students will express important ideas that are rough or unclear. Asking students to define their terms or to reword their statements may help students hone their ideas.
- Make distinctions that will further the analysis. For example, if students are discussing duties, ask them what kinds of duties they want to include or emphasize (legal, professional, ethical)?
- Look for logical inconsistencies or fallacies in the students' arguments.
- Ask yourself whether a student's comment is supportive of an ethical theory (e.g. utilitarianism or rule-based theories). Challenge them to consider the shortcomings of that theory and how an alternate theory might address the issue.
- Challenge students to take an opposing view or to be critical of their own view. Ask them to consider the weaknesses of their arguments. What, if anything, makes them uneasy about their own views?
- Ask students to justify their views or the statements they make. If the response is 'I just feel that way' or 'I just know it's right', ask them to explain why. Many times students will refer to principles or values to justify their views, and these provide more justificatory power than do feelings or intuitions. If no principle or value emerges, challenge students to consider whether their emotive responses or intuitions are wrong.
- Provide balance. Play the devil's advocate. Don't let the argument be decided by the strength or a student's personality or by the loudness of the argument.
- Check for redundant views. Keep the analysis simple.
- Be on the lookout for frustration. If you sense a student is becoming frustrated, ask him or her to express this frustration. Many times this will lead to interesting and important ideas.
- Stick to the case. While departing from the case may sometimes be useful, letting the discussion wander can be dangerous. You may create a discussion that is difficult to direct. Stick to the facts of the case. Many of the facts will limit the number of the issues that need to be considered.

*Contributed by the Department of Genome Sciences Education Outreach and the Department of Medical History and Ethics, University of Washington*